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シーキューブ
CubexCursedxCurious

VI

水瀬葉月
Illustration ちょりがため



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C u b e × C u r s e d × C u r i o u s



Scene01:淑なるもの爆なるもの

勉強が終わったら、

みんなでプールに繰り出すぞー!!

フィア

色々あって夜知家に身を寄せる少女。紺のスクール水着は、文化祭の水泳部お手伝いで入手☆

むら まさ
村正このは

今まさにこぼれんとする眼鏡っ娘。無敵のアピールポイントを遺憾なく発揮予定!!

にん ぎょう はら ぐろ え
人形原黒絵

白スク水の前となしに掛けては右に出るものなし!!
その実体は……超幼児体型20歳美容師!?

や ち はろ あき
夜知春亮

じじむさく結れてるくせにフィア・このは・黒絵と同居中! なんとモウラヤマシイ高校一年生。



Scene02:睦まじきもの秘されるもの

「じいじに見るな……馬鹿な……」

うえのきりか
上野錐霞
春亮のクラスの学級委員長。「脱げば死ぬ」あるアイテムを身につけているため、普段は極力肌を見せようとしていないのだから……？

「もうっ、サヴェレンティっ……」

さくらまわりしらほ
桜参白穂
サヴェレンティの所有者で恋人。ちょっと素直じゃない、天の邪鬼なところもある美少女。

「ねえねえ白穂っ、遊ぼうよー！」

サヴェレンティ
呪われた《王権を果たす完全人形》にして、白糖の恋人。大変なドジっ娘でもある。

Scene03:乱入するものたち

かい どう いみ
潰道 忌

春亮のクラスの副担任。常にスコップ片手にジャージを纏った体育教師。彼女の隠された過去が物語の鍵を握る……?

「『哭き噉ぶ首無し人形』を渡せ」

フォーティーン
クーンズベリ

切子を追い、「呪われた人形を渡せ」と迫る謎の女。

おん てん さき せつ こ
穂天崎切子

フォーティーンに追われ、春亮たちに保護された少女。並ぶ者なきオカルトマニア。

「切子ごときのために、す、すみません！」

「利」

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Designed by Toru Suzuki



—シーキューブ—
Cube×Cursed×Curious

水瀬葉月

Illustration さそりがため

Prologue

As soon as he opened the entrance, Haruaki found himself buried in a maid.

"Huh!?"

"Hiya—! I never expected this day to finally arrive! Thank you for your hospitality today, please treat me well—!"

Naturally, Haruaki was not being buried in a swarm of maids like a tidal wave. He was simply being wedged within a certain body part of the maid who was hugging him. Only after pausing for a few seconds did Haruaki realize how dangerous his current position was.

"Uwoah? W-Welcome... Sovereignty, I understand how happy you are, but first, please let go...!"

Haruaki frantically tried to struggle free but Sovereignty held him even tighter, preventing his escape no matter what. Just at that moment, beneath the dim illumination of the entryway's light, Haruaki saw a girl's face surface vaguely. With facial features as exquisite as an elegant piece of artwork, her beautiful face was smiling in a most terrifying manner.

"—Thank you for your hospitality, human. Please accept my humble souvenir."

"Ouch~!"

A stone, massive enough to be used as a weight for a pickle press, descended upon Haruaki's instep. Haruaki would have hopped all over the place in pain, but that was made impossible by a maid's firm embrace. Glaring resentfully at the girl—Shiraho—he shouted:

"What the heck kind of souvenir is this!?"

"A stone, originating from the entrance of a foolish human's house. It

possesses numerous functions such as producing screams from a human whose very sight displeases me. Is one not enough? In that case, I can instantly prepare a second one."

"I refuse from the bottom of my heart!"

"A mere human, yet you dare refuse my souvenir, how utterly impudent... Anyway, Sovereignty, hurry and leave him. Otherwise, you will be tainted."

Saying that, Shiraho pulled Sovereignty away by force. Only then did the maid finally calm down.

"Ah... Ehehe, sorry, Haruaki-kun. I'm in really great spirits because it's been so long since I came over to your house to play."

"Speaking of which, you only came by once before, right? That's quite surprising, actually."

"Hmph, I'm not here for fun, Sovereignty. Even if I were going out for fun, I wouldn't want to come to a place like this. I really can't stand that man..."

Muttering to herself, Shiraho was completely right. Sovereignty aside, Shiraho certainly did not come to play. Instead, she was here in order to handle a great event that was looming ahead in a few days. As soon as Haruaki was reminded of that event, he was unable to relax.

"Please enter. Those girls are ready... By the way, what's that portable cooler for?"

"Fufu, that's a secret—"

Haruaki spoke as he welcomed them into the house and brought them to the living room. The corridor was filled with a lingering aroma from dinner just now. Sovereignty happily took a forceful sniff and said: "Ah, it's the smell of curry." Just as they entered the living room—

"My bosom buddy—!"

"Kyah! Kuroe-chan, good evening—!"

With a series of audible steps, Kuroe trotted over and performed a back dive motion while Sovereignty embraced her tightly. Holding Kuroe in her arms, Sovereignty repeatedly spun Kuroe in midair as though they were dancing at a

ball—These two girls' relationship remained as close as ever.

However, Kuroe was not the only one present in the living room. There was the silver-haired girl, staring at the table with a frown as she went "Hmm—"—Fear. Looking up, she instantly brightened her expression and stood up.

"Ohoh, you're here! My dear comrades!"

"...Don't casually call us your comrades, okay?"

"What are you talking about? After the exams last time, didn't we head to school together on a holiday for supplementary lessons? Therefore, our camaraderie cannot compare with those heartless people over there!"

"Not going to school on a holiday is very normal... That's got nothing to do with being heartless or not, right?"

Konoha sighed in exasperation. Putting down the textbook in her hand, she also stood up to welcome Shiraho.

"Welcome, welcome, Shiraho-san. Although I don't know if I'm able to help you, please feel free to ask me about anything you don't understand. Let us try our best to reduce the number of failing subjects."

Hearing Konoha's words, Shiraho's gaze began to waver slightly in embarrassment. Looking up at the ceiling, she replied:

"Umm... Actually, I'm fine with studying on my own. But since that annoying man insists that I join a study gathering, I am in a position where I have no choice but to participate. And if teaching me happens to provide you with amusement, well, since it's your personal interest, I won't say anything—If that makes you happy, I could... ask you some questions."

"Great, very well."

Konoha chuckled "Ehehe" and smiled gently. Sovereignty plopped Kuroe down on the tatami and swiftly approached Konoha. Holding Konoha's hand tightly, she said:

"Teacher! Konoha-chan the teacher! My dear Shiraho will be in your care for today. Despite how she looks, she's actually very motivated! So please, please don't abandon her—!"

"I-I'm not going to abandon her, okay!? But if you keep calling me 'teacher,' I'll feel very embarrassed..."

"Hey Sovereignty, you're acting shamefully. Don't do that, okay!?"

Fear pursed her lips unhappily at the sight before her.

"Hmph, rotten Cow Tits, how dare you act so superior...! If it's English, I'm able to help too!"

"Actually, I'll need your help in that area too, teacher. But if you teach me using an excessively native accent like you did for the midterms last time, I'll feel very troubled instead."

When Haruaki said that, Fear's mood seemed to improve. Puffing her tiny chest out, she replied:

"Hmph hmph, since you say so, I'll have mercy when I'm teaching you. Anyway, Haruaki, speaking of teachers, you should have found someone better than Cow Tits to be the teacher, right?"

"Yeah, I asked her. She should be arriving soon... Oh!"

At this moment, the doorbell rang. Haruaki bid Fear and the rest to prepare the living room while he went to answer the door. Standing at the entryway, the visitor was, of course—

"Oh, Class Rep, welcome... I'm really sorry for asking you to come here."

"No, it's fine. After all, it's quite boring to study on my own. A change of environment might actually make things smoother. I'd say you asked me at the perfect time."

It was Kirika in casual clothing. Like Shiraho, she had brought a bag filled with studying materials.

"Smoother... huh? But the people waiting for you to extend a helping hand, Class Rep, includes certain problematic children."

"Konoha-kun will help instruct, right? In that case, there's no problem. Besides, I've already gone through everything the exams are supposed to cover. All I have left to do is overall revision."

"Dear heavens! As expected of you, Class Rep. Seeing your 'serious attitude,' I'm starting to feel urgent myself."

"Then you should blame yourself for not studying seriously throughout the term... Hmm, why are there so many shoes here? Am I the last to arrive?"

"That's right, everyone's here. But they're all just being noisy so we haven't started studying yet."

Kirika went "seriously" with a wry smile, took off her shoes and entered the corridor. Just as she walked towards the living room, it happened as though planned in advance for this moment—

Ding dong—!

The doorbell rang again. Haruaki and Kirika looked at each other.

"...Perhaps even Kana or Taizou are coming?"

"Should be impossible... They previously declined our invitation because they had made plans with their clubs already. So it must be the postman or someone else."

Haruaki answered leisurely as he turned around to open the door.

"Coming~ May I ask who is it..."

The instant he saw the person at the door, Haruaki's mind desperately refused to accept what his eyes saw. This was impossible.

Slide—Thud.

Without saying a word, Haruaki slid the glass door shut at the entrance, refusing to face the other person. Just as he looked back in trepidation, he happened to see Kirika rubbing her eyes in full seriousness. Clearly, she was doubting her own eyes too—Indeed, both of them had seen the same person. Logically speaking, this was a face who should not show up here.



Ding dong—!

The bell kept ringing. Haruaki could not ignore it. Hence, taking a deep breath to calm himself, Haruaki slowly slid the glass door open again—

"...If you want to ask who I am, then I shall answer you. However, it should be impossible for you two not to know. Yachi Haruaki, Boy, Seat No.16 of Year 1 Class 2, as well as Ueno Kirika, Girl, Seat No.2 from the same class."

No trace of any smiling could be found on the woman's face. Dressed as usual in her daily tracksuit, she spoke coolly.

Beneath the dim light at the entryway, the metal shovel on her shoulder glimmered brightly.

"My name is Kaidou Imi. I am both a physical education teacher at Taishyuu Private High School, as well as your assistant homeroom teacher."

Chapter 1 - Possibly Hardworking Students. Later, / "Visitors—the physical educator and the dowser"

Part 1

After school, the day just before the end of term exams—In other words, a few hours prior to the arrival of Haruaki's surprise visitor...

Haruaki and company were in the superintendent's office. On this rare occasion when he was actually present at school, the superintendent had invited them over for tea. The people present included Haruaki, Fear, Konoha, the room's master—the superintendent—of course, Zenon, as well as Sovereignty who was carrying the tea and snacks industriously but precariously. In addition—

"Oh dear~ One of the great trials of student life will begin tomorrow: End of term exams~"

"That's right, surviving this challenge means welcoming the arrival of the winter break."

"Hahaha, I can understand that what you really care about is the vacation. But studying is part of a student's duty. In order to enjoy your holidays, you must work hard and pass your exams. Especially people who did not do well on the midterms last time—I believe there was even a student who accomplished the amazing result of failing all subjects."

"N-Not me! Umm, I only failed two, that's all!"

"I admit you're working very hard, Fear-kun, but I hope you can pass everything this time. Anyway, it is most fortunate that the student who failed all subjects is blessed with a group of benevolent comrades. This time, they have gone out of their way to invite her to a study gathering. I only hope that she won't skip showing up because of meaningless stubbornness—Do you agree with me, Shiraho-kun?"

The bottom of the gas mask leaked out a strange breathing noise. Shiraho, who was originally drinking tea beside Sovereignty, sighed unhappily; was she trying to oppose the gas mask's strange sound? Then glaring viciously, she looked straight at the superintendent for the first time since entering the room.

"...You called us here just to tell us this? I never would have expected you to waste time on such inane matters. Why, how free you are, freak."

"It's not inane at all. After all, you're the daughter of my dear friend, so of course I must pay attention to your conduct. If he knew you were failing or going to be held back a grade, he would be very sad, right?"

Shiraho clicked her tongue hard as though deliberately making everyone hear her. Murderous intent was now added to her vicious gaze.

"...Can't I just study seriously on my own?"

"It's perfectly fine for you to think that. However, to ensure that you'll do well on the exams, I think you really need to know the 'tricks for getting marks.' But the problem is this: for a girl who used to rarely attend class in school, can she really figure out those tricks simply through self-studying...? To be frank, I'm really worried. By the way, Zenon-kun, could you free up one day in my schedule next week?"

"Please be patient for a moment—It is possible if various schedules are adjusted. May I ask why?"

The beautiful secretary spoke as she operated an electronic notebook.

"Yes, given the circumstances, I believe I need to pay respects at my dear friend's grave... And make a report to him briefly. Such as—I'm sorry but even though you entrusted your daughter in my care, I am apparently incapable of ensuring that she can graduate smoothly."

"I-I get the message, okay!? I'm going, fine, I'm going!"

Shiraho cut off the superintendent and violently put down her teacup. In a huff, she crossed her arms before her chest and closed her eyes. She apparently did not want to look at the superintendent's face any longer.

"Very well, so long as you're able to display your industrious efforts, no matter how many subjects you fail, I won't consider it a major problem. Do your best and good luck."

"Ehehe, if it's Shiraho, I'm sure she'll be fine—Hey, Haruaki-kun, would it be troublesome if I came along and visited you guys? I can serve you tea and help with different things."

Hugging Shiraho from the side, Sovereignty looked towards Haruaki. Of course, the moment Shiraho was invited to join them in a study gathering, Sovereignty was already included in the guest list.

"Of course it's okay. Besides, I think Kuroe might be a distraction to us. If you're willing to be her companion, it'd actually be a great help to me."

"Wow, that's right, Kuroe-chan will be there too. Yes yes, actually on further thought, it's been so long since I last visited your home, Haruaki-kun. I'm really looking forward to it!"

"Is that so... That's really... wonderful..."

Hugged by Sovereignty like a doll, Shiraho sighed in exhaustion. It was probably her lover's exuberant enthusiasm that caused her to realize she had no way out. If she still tried to skip out, the superintendent aside, even Sovereignty would be very sad. Shiraho probably would not allow that to happen.

"Yes, so Shiraho and Sovereignty are joining? Looks like tonight will be very fun."

"Wait a sec, Fear, this is no time for fun. Don't forget that your position is only second to Shiraho's."

"That's right. Like the very dismal performance you turned in for Japanese class earlier, are you really devoting effort in studying?"

"O-Of course... I... am."

"Why are your eyes drifting towards the side?"

Just as Fear turned the back of her head towards Haruaki and Konoha's narrowed gazes, there was a sudden sound resembling a fart. Rather than someone doing something embarrassing, it was the superintendent laughing wryly.

"Your Japanese is still no good yet? After all, the Japanese language really is tough~"

"Yeah, that's right. I think having three different scripts for writing is so inefficient. Like 'breasts,' 'glasses,' 'overweight,' etc, just use hiragana for all of them and be done with it!"

"A-Am I being over sensitive? Why do I get the feeling that you picked those words maliciously?"

Amidst the noisy conversation, there was suddenly a series of blunt noises. Someone was knocking at the door.

Zenon answered and the door immediately opened. A seldom-seen face appeared at the superintendent's office. Naturally, it was a very familiar face in Haruaki and the rest's daily school lives.

"—I am Kaidou. Making a delivery on Houjyou-sensei's request."

This was Kaidou Imi, the physical education teacher. Despite being a beautiful woman with long, sleek, black hair, her pair of sharp eyes exuded a weapon-like and dangerous aura. The faint scar on her cheek further enhanced this impression. The scar that gave off that kind of feeling no matter how one looked, combined with her calm and composed attitude resembling that of a seasoned warrior, inevitably gave rise to all sorts of speculation among the students. But to this date, no student had mustered the courage to confirm the veracity of such claims, of course.

She was always dressed in a bright red tracksuit. For a woman in her twenties, this manner of attire could be said to be too plain. Most attention-drawing of all was, of course, the tool she used to substitute for a PE teacher's bamboo sword—the metal shovel she always carried on her shoulder. Even the little flower

hairpin she often used next to her ear only produced an impression in viewers that was completely opposite to "cute"—Haruaki recalled what Taizou had said —

"That hairpin... How should I say this? It looks like the kind of cherry blossoms that float down in yakuza films or period dramas after someone says 'Your life, I will be taking it'..."

In any case, that was the impression she gave off. As a side note, it was the comment made by Taizou after he was spanked by the shovel (Kaidou-sensei's unique punishment) for being excessively noisy in class.

"Did Ganon-neesama ask you to deliver this? I'm sorry she made you walk all this way."

"Worry not, by pure happenstance, I was just about to make my return to the teaching staff office."

Word choice reflecting ancient sensibilities and a strict expression more serious than anyone, these were her usual hallmarks and no longer came as a surprise to Haruaki and the rest. Then Kaidou walked over directly to Zenon while holding what appeared to be documents. Their eyes suddenly met during the process. Since she was Haruaki's assistant homeroom teacher, she would know his name and face, of course. Haruaki and Konoha nodded lightly to greet her and she responded in kind.

Sitting beside them, Fear also saw her reaction. However, Fear reacted in a manner that could not be considered a greeting, simply shaking her head strangely. She should have seen Kaidou but was making a tense poker face for some reason. Haruaki found Fear's attitude quite inexplicable.

"Thank you for your effort, I acknowledge receipt. I am really grateful to you."

"—Not at all, then I shall take my leave."

At this moment, the superintendent called out to Kaidou who was just about to turn and leave, having completed her task.

"Ah~ Could you wait a little bit, Kaidou-sensei?"

"...May I ask what is the matter?"

"Nothing particularly major. I was just talking to these students here about tomorrow's exams. As a teacher, do you have any frank advice to offer them?"

"The school prohibits the discussion of all matters related to the content of the exams. Besides, I am not a teacher in charge of preparing the questions this time."

In contrast to Kaidou's solemn answer, the superintendent shrugged casually and said:

"Nothing that serious, perhaps I should clarify, it's regarding mental preparation for exams—In other words, as an educator, could you provide them some related, overall suggestions?"

She paused for several seconds before answering. The metal shovel on her shoulder could be seen trembling slightly, or perhaps she was sighing. Then looking at Haruaki's group, she spoke earnestly:

"Work hard."

"Th-That's all? In particular, Fear-kun is a foreign student, couldn't you say a little more..."

After the superintendent shrugged and said that, Kaidou looked towards Fear. For some reason, Fear's face showed tension like earlier and she sat up straight to wait for Kaidou's response. However—

Kaidou hastily averted eye contact in an unnatural manner for some reason.

Her voice was also very soft, even ice-cold.

"—I have nothing special to say. Excuse me, goodbye."

Saying that, Kaidou immediately left the superintendent's office, leaving Haruaki's group watching the door in puzzlement. Shiraho and Sovereignty were looking at each in bewilderment.

"Hmmmmmm..."

Fear frowned with her arms crossed before her chest. Haruaki elbowed her in the arm and said:

"Hey, did you ever do anything to Kaidou-sensei?"

"I don't know. However, it's always been strange."

"What's strange?"

Fear eyed Haruaki beside her then her gaze fell to her feet. Her head cocked, an expression of puzzlement, she explained:

"Actually it's been like that since I first arrived. I keep getting the feeling that this teacher seems to be avoiding me on purpose..."

"Hmm—The situation just now was quite strange."

"Really? I believe that Fear-san simply has persecution mania. It feels like Kaidou-sensei is always like this normally... Although I've spoken to her very little so I don't know the details."

"What persecution mania!? Actually, there are other cases apart from today. Like there were two people talking and getting scolded severely by her, but towards me, she simply skirted the issue with a single sentence. There's also plenty of similar evidence! Rather than avoiding me, it'd be better to say she's looking down on me only!"

"Ah, I get it! Perhaps you're too adorable, Fear-chan, and you look too much like a foreigner, so it makes her really nervous. Does that work? What do you think, Shiraho?"

"Speaking of what I'm thinking right now, 'Can I go home now?' That's all."

Haruaki sipped his black tea that was about to get cold and pondered.

Although Kaidou-sensei was difficult to approach, oddly enough, the students did not dislike her. Naturally, Haruaki did not dislike her either. Her eyes were always stern and she never did anything emotional or irrational. She was always angry for legitimate reason and quite reasonable. Why would that kind of person single Fear out to treat differently? However, her attitude that he witnessed just now really did not seem quite normal...

(I really don't get it. Since there isn't some kind of misunderstanding between them, I hope I can find a way to make her treat Fear normally.)

"Yes, that's right. I agree with you completely. We must find a way to make her treat Fear-kun normally."

Haruaki suddenly heard a breathing noise by his ear. It turned out that the superintendent had already moved behind the sofa while Haruaki was immersed in his thoughts, giving him quite a fright.

"You can read minds, superintendent...?"

"Because your thoughts are too easy to see through. I simply made a casual guess."

On the other hand, Fear looked like she had already forgotten about Kaidou-sensei and was busy arguing with Konoha over trivial matters. The superintendent supported his lower jaw on his hand while resting his elbow on the back of the sofa, watching Fear's dispute through the gas mask. Soon after —

"A school is also a place for people learn how to get along with elders like teachers. If the other person is deliberately avoiding you, then things cannot start at all... And Kaidou-sensei is your assistant homeroom teacher as well. If there's a wall between you and the assistant homeroom teacher, that could lead to all kinds of trouble for Fear-kun in the future. Hence, corresponding measures must be taken."

The superintendent was muttering in a voice only audible to Haruaki. Despite feeling he should fully support what the superintendent was talking about, Haruaki could not help getting an ominous feeling.

This was because Haruaki seemed to be hearing a strange snickering coming from beneath the superintendent's gas mask, carrying some sort of motive.

Part 2

(My ominous feeling was right on target...!)

Haruaki secretly sighed to himself as he recalled what had happened a few hours earlier.

Currently, Kaidou was opposite to the table, sitting formally in *seiza* posture with her back completely straight. The usual metal shovel she always kept by her side was resting beside her on the tatami floor. Although Haruaki had suggested indirectly "Perhaps it might be better to leave it at the entrance...", her reply of "Have no fear, I always wash it to a very clean degree" was totally incomprehensible. Haruaki felt that she was missing the point.

"...Say, Haru, who is that?"

Closing in discreetly, Kuroe whispered in Haruaki's ear.

"Kaidou-sensei is from our school."

"...I'm guessing that her nickname must be Scoop-sensei."

"Close, but a pity. The one in fashion right now is 'Scoop Teacher' or 'Scottie' in short."

"Why does that sound like a brand of tissues? Anyway, I got it. Then I'll casually try calling her. Hello Scottie—"

"Idiot, don't call her that! Do you want to die!? It's not like you can call it to her face!"

"Mumble mumble."

"Uh—Yeah... So... Kaidou-sensei, may I ask why you came to my house...?"

Haruaki muffled Kuroe's mouth as he smiled politely and asked.

"...I was sent by the superintendent to supervise this study gathering."

This was the first sentence of her reply. Then she continued explaining in her usual cool and detached manner.

As a member of the teaching profession, it was necessary to ensure one's reliability as someone whom students could depend on even outside of class. Judging that she was lacking in this area, the superintendent had assigned her this task in order to augment her skills as a teacher. Furthermore, since she was not in charge of the exam questions this time, there was no conflict in interest if she simply supervised or gave advice on study skills. Besides, in consideration of the special circumstance that one member of the study gathering included a foreign transfer student, there should not be anything unfair—

(Why did the superintendent employ such forceful measures...)

Haruaki glanced at Fear. On the surface, she was nonchalantly flipping through her textbook, but he could also see her sneaking glances at Kaidou from time to time. Clearly Fear was quite bothered by her presence.

"Uh... So, I have many things I need to think about, could you give me a little time please!? Why don't you have some tea first, Kaidou-sensei!"

"I do not quite understand what you are trying to say, but no matter, I shall have some tea first."

Kaidou sipped tea at the table while Haruaki and the rest took this opportunity to hold a strategy conference on the other side of the table. Originally nonchalant, Fear was also dragged into their meeting. This bizarre act was a bit rude to the teacher, but they did have their many difficulties after all.

"W-What should we do...?"

"You're asking me... What should we do now?"

"To be frank, I really have no idea how to deal with her. But it's not like we can just ask her to leave, right?"

"Sovereignty, I'm beginning to feel that it's better that I go back and study at home."

"Don't do that... Since she is a teacher, doesn't that mean there's one more person who can teach you? Isn't this great?"

"It doesn't really matter to me... What about you, Ficchi?"

Kuroe's question prompted Fear to cross her arms before her chest and turn her gaze to one side as she answered:

"...I don't really care. Ignoring noisy people like Taizou and Kana, if an unfamiliar adult hangs around here, it does make one uncomfortable more or less. Besides, the fact that we're not human might get revealed to her by chance..."

That was quite worrisome indeed. But even knowing the truth, why did the superintendent still make such an arrangement? Haruaki already knew the superintendent was concerned about Fear's relationship with the teacher, but bringing them so suddenly in close contact was not going to work that easily—

Just as he was pondering about these matters, the answer suddenly came from an unexpected source... Namely, from Kaidou-sensei's own mouth.

"Hmm... I almost forgot."

"Eh, w-what is it...?"

The teacup was placed down onto the table. Then the teacher spoke without changing her cold demeanor at all:

"First of all, I knew about you all very early on. I already know of the existence of cursed tools in this world. Consequently, there is no need for you to intentionally hide the fact."

Kaidou explained such an important matter in clear and simple terms. Fear looked up as though rebounding but did not make a sound. Hence, Haruaki voiced surprise on her behalf.

"R-Really?"

"Did the superintendent inform you? I don't really believe he would readily disclose to others..."

Konoha narrowed her eyes slightly as she spoke. Kaidou shook her head lightly:

"Your statement is half correct. I did indeed learn about your identities from the superintendent. However, as for the matter concerning the existence of

cursed tools, I have known that fact since a very long time ago."

"What do you mean by that?"

This time, it was the teacher's turn to narrow her eyes, as though reminiscing something.

"...I personally experienced a certain incident once, an incident that involved a cursed tool. I wanted to understand the significance. Hence, after the incident, I heard about this school from someone and came to this place... I heard that there was a man here who understood cursed tools."

"The superintendent...?"

"Verily indeed. I sought the superintendent's counsel regarding the incident from the past but it was not a matter that could be understood immediately. That is also the reason why I started working in the school as a member of the teaching staff. All throughout this time, I have been consulting the superintendent and his aides on various matters. In other words... One could describe it as like an apprentice perhaps?"

Haruaki was suddenly reminded of the look on the gas masked man's face whenever he collected allegedly cursed tools, asking "How is this? It's not? Hmm, here's another one!" The notion of him taking an apprentice seemed unbelievable... However, he was the friend of Haruaki's father after all. Compared to ordinary people who were unaware of cursed tools' existence, the superintendent should possess more detailed information.

At this moment, Kudou glanced at Haruaki.

"—Yachi Haruaki of Seat No.16, the superintendent's intelligence network is more comprehensive than you may think."

"Eh?"

"The second matter I forgot was the superintendent's message. He said: 'This is a good opportunity to bring it up, so let me tell you this: From now on, don't be shy and feel free to visit and have fun.'"

Kaidou shifted her gaze and ended up staring at Kirika.

"The superintendent already knew what your side thought they were hiding.

In other words, for example... Regarding Ueno Kirika of Seat No.2, what organization you belonged to and the artifacts in your possession."

"Hmm...!"

This time it was Kirika's turn to gaze viciously. Glaring with hostility at the teacher's face, she looked like she was trying to see into Kaidou's mind, thereby discerning the superintendent's true intentions.

"He knows... I'm from the Lab Chief's Nation?"

"Verily indeed, he knew all along from the very beginning."

"And about my partner?"

"He already knew."

"This means that we mistakenly believed that we had infiltrated successfully when in fact we were under surveillance all along... Hmph, how absolutely ridiculous of us..."

"Class Rep..."

Kirika took her gaze off Kaidou, exhaled slightly and smiled towards Haruaki's group.

"I know, after all, I've cut off ties with that side anyway. Frankly speaking, I originally planned to find a suitable chance to confess to the superintendent... After all, hiding this matter makes it more difficult for me to help you guys. This is actually good news instead. Apart from saving me the need to find a time to explain, it also allows me to discuss how *that guy* should be dealt with."

Kirika's mentioning of *that guy* probably referred to her partner? Haruaki had heard that Kirika had not seen him ever since she injured him, but judging from her tone of voice, he might be back some day. Haruaki decided to clarify the matter with her next time.

"However, I never expected the superintendent to... actually know about the Lab Chief's Nation. I always thought he was just a weirdo, but he might actually turn out to be more impressive than I thought..."

"Really? But then again, he really is quite a mysterious character."

"Speaking of impressive, his secretary, Houjyou-san, is actually quite amazing. Like during the cultural festival, she must have been putting on quite an act... Since the superintendent already knew about the Lab Chief's Nation, it's hard to imagine that she was not aware of things."

Kirika glanced at Kaidou again, who nodded lightly in response.

"Of course, the same goes for Houjyou-dono. She also requested that I pass along this message to Ueno Kirika: 'My sincere apologies. Next time you pay a visit to the office, I will be sure to prepare some tasty snacks and tea to serve you.'"

Kirika nodded, went "Really?" and sighed. She seemed to be whispering softly, dumbfounded at her own ignorance.

"...Actually thinking over things carefully, I should have realized considering that an ordinary student like me was involved in that bomb scare crisis. After all, it was quite strange more or less."

"After all, she is a person who's quite hard to read sometimes... Even if she deceives me, I don't have any confidence I'd be able to pick it up. This couldn't be helped."

"Now then, these are all the matters I have forgotten to inform you. Students, you may start your studying session now."

Since Kaidou was sent here on purpose by the superintendent, it would be improper to ask her to leave just like that. Now that the facts were out in the open, there was no need to worry about Fear or the others exposing their true identities. With that, there was no choice but to accept this supervisor and start studying hard. Currently speaking, this was the only option.

Whoosh.

...For some reason, Kaidou decided to pick up her shovel at this time. It was quite disturbing.

"Eh, uh, so, I think I'll be excusing myself now..."

Kuroe decided to flee. You traitor.

"Sovey-chan, would you like to visit my room?"

"Y-Yeah...! I'm finding it hard to adjust to this boring atmosphere! S-Shiraho, good luck and do your best!"

"Sigh... I pray that all goes well."

Traitor No.2 followed Kuroe and left. Haruaki and the rest slowly opened up their textbooks and notes, then started to study hard for their respective exams.

Five minutes passed, then ten minutes—

The scene was completely silent.

(Th-This feels so awkward...)

Unable to withstand the pressure coming from Kaidou who was sitting motionlessly like the Buddhist guardian of hell, Haruaki looked around to check out his surroundings. Fear was sneaking glances at Kaidou's every move then writing something in her notebook. Kirika was flipping through textbooks lightly, her shoulder squirming on occasion. Shiraho looked like a statue holding a mechanical pencil, facing her textbook without moving at all.

Then Haruaki looked towards Konoha who happened to look his way as well. Blinking repeatedly, she seemed to be pleading for help, motioning with her eyes towards Kaidou-sensei...

Ah, that's right. If no one achieved a breakthrough in this impasse, the study gathering could not get started at all. Dialogue must be used as a chance to initiate the harmonious atmosphere of a study gathering where people taught one another. Someone had to step up even if it meant self-sacrifice in this dangerous mission. In that case, as the only man and master of the house present, I'll have to do it...!

Hence, Haruaki mustered his courage in a manner akin to self-hypnosis and resolutely looked up. Swallowing saliva to lubricate his throat...

"Excuse me... Kaidou-senei! I wonder if you could help me with this question here!"

Seeing Fear and the others twitch their shoulders in fright, Haruaki approached the teacher and handed the chemistry textbook over.

Despite being examined by Kaidou's sharp glaze, now was not the time to be afraid. This was the first step towards easing the tense atmosphere. Through dialogue with the teacher, building a bridge to lighten the mood in this room slightly...

"I see... This part?"

"Yes, right there."

Haruaki nodded. See, there's no need to be so scared to death. If I talk to the teacher, she'll answer properly. So long as we show how we're studying seriously, she will stand on our side. She's a teacher after all.

The teacher went "hmm" and nodded. Just as Haruaki was feeling relieved as though his efforts at communication finally got through to a man-eating wolf, a smile appearing on his face—

"—No idea, finished."

The teacher ended up pushing the textbook back with just a single sentence. It felt like trying to pet a wild wolf and getting bitten as a result.

"I-I see..."

But at this moment, a miracle occurred. The vicious wild wolf seemed to realize someone was hurt and consequently sighed as a self-reminder.

"My utmost apologies. I am a physical education teacher. If you ask questions about other subjects, I may not know the answer. If you wish to ask, please ask about physical and health education."

"R-Right! A-Ahaha, I'm sorry! Then... Uh... I'll find questions from the health textbook..."

"Yes, in that case, you can ask anything you want. If you cannot understand my explanations, I can even provide live demonstrations."

"L-Live demonstrations?"

"Judo or similar sports are my specialty. Even if certain skills are difficult to understand through illustrations, they can be learnt through actual physical experience."

"In that case, uh... I'm not sure if I should say it's good or bad news... But judo isn't covered in the exam. Uh... I recall that this time, it's on first aid and lifesaving..."

"I see, then let me give you a live demonstration."

As Haruaki flipped through the textbook to confirm what was covered, Kaidou nodded vigorously in response. Then...

Suddenly, she unzipped her tracksuit and removed the jacket.

Spilling out. Volume that rivaled Konoha's, a certain bulging shape was almost spilling out of the gym t-shirt beneath the jacket. Next, Kaidou put down the shovel and laid herself down on the tatami floor.

"Come."

"...Come again?"

"If you want practice, I can serve as your practice partner. Heart massage or artificial respiration, either is fine."

For an instant, Haruaki failed to understand what the teacher was saying.

Heart massage = touching that bulging body part that was heaving up and down slightly underneath that t-shirt.

Artificial respiration = doing *that* with those soft lips whose color looked vivid despite clearly having no lipstick on them.

As soon as Haruaki's mind confirmed those definitions again, he instantly stepped back in haste and answered:

"I-I'm not doing that!"

"Why? This is indeed covered by the examination—"

Kaidou spoke with full seriousness. At this moment...

"No way!?"

"Yachi, what are you planning here!? I can't forgive you.!"

"Y-Y-You... You... shameless brat! I'll curse you as hard as I can!"

Instantly, Haruaki found three hands grabbing him by the collar, dragging him

backwards.

"So~ Haruaki-kun! Chemistry, you wanted to ask questions about chemistry, right? I happen to be studying this subject as well, so let's study together!"

"Didn't you say you had questions on math as well? I'll teach you if you ask!"

"Okay, Haruaki, let's get back to studying! No, I've got a question for you, how do you read this kanji here?"

Haruaki listened as the three girls spoke in succession—with Fear going so far as slapping his head with her textbook—as they dragged him back to his original seat. Amidst the chaos, Haruaki saw Kaidou sit back up.

"...You do not require practice with physical education anymore?"

Appearing on her calm face was a questioning look as simple as her query. Indeed, she clearly was not aware why Fear and the girls had hastily dragged Haruaki away...

Haruaki exchanged looks with the three girls. Since he was being dragged away whole, his posture was such that they were looking down at him on the floor.

Once he obtained consensus regarding the conclusion surfacing in his mind, Haruaki slowly turned his head back and said:

"U-Umm... Because the physical and health education exam is only the last day, I think I'd better focus on the other... subjects first..."

"—I see. I agree with your assessment. Please study hard then."

Kaidou murmured as she stroked her chin gently, putting on her tracksuit jacket again. Straightening her back and sticking her chest out with a grunt, she resumed watching over the students in her hell guardian mode with a solemn expression.

Haruaki's group once again looked at one another awkwardly and whispered among themselves.

"I've rarely spoken to her so I don't know her quite well, but perhaps, is it possible that Kaidou-sensei might be..."

"*That* possibility...?"

"Very possible. Perhaps because very few people get close to her, it has never presented itself."

"Muu, stop leaving me in the dark! What does *that* mean, tell me!"

"Uh... The opposite of 'cultivated,' I guess...?" Haruaki explained to Fear whose eyebrows were raised and eyes were glaring in anger.

"...?" Fear cocked her head in puzzlement as though a question mark had appeared over her head.

But speaking of question marks, Shiraho had no shortage of those. Completely oblivious to the commotion all this time, she was simply staring at the textbook, going "...!? ...!?!?!?" as though petrified.

Part 3

Haruaki's brave attempt to engage the teacher seemed to have gotten results. Subsequently, the living room atmosphere became slightly more at ease. Although talking was not prohibited previously, the self-imposed silence finally ended. However, the teacher was still silently sitting upright on the side of the room.

"So, for this type of question, just memorize the formulae on this side and over there. That'll basically solve them... Shiraho-kun, are you okay?"

"I-I get... it... Ah, seriously, my brain feels like it's about to explode..."

"Haruaki Haruaki, how do I pronounce this one and that one?"

"Come on, you there~ Couldn't you check a dictionary by yourself on occasion?"

Oh right, so this is the attitude a study gathering should have the day before the exam. Feeling moved for some reason, Haruaki continued to study his own materials. As a side note, Kuroe and Sovereignty still had not returned after deserting them. Since the light on the second floor of the accessory dwelling was on, they were probably still having fun in Kuroe's room. Haruaki could not help but feel heartfelt envy for those who had already entered the workforce.

But there was no way to swap places with them. The superintendent was right, studying was a student's duty. Although there was the unnerving presence of the teacher with the cool exterior but a personality that was oblivious in certain ways, as long as he concentrated on studying, there was nothing to be concerned about—

Just at this moment, Haruaki suddenly realized why the superintendent had sent Kaidou-sensei over.

(He originally wanted to bring her and Fear closer together... Probably that.

But if Fear's just studying while ignoring her, it's a bit pointless.)

He shifted his gaze. Although Fear was studying with full seriousness, she clearly did not show any intention to make contact with Kaidou-sensei.

(Hmmmmmm... But a forceful method could end up counterproductive...)

Hence, Haruaki reviewed Kaidou's past behavior on his own.

The only thing he figured out was that he was not mistaken.

She did act strange sometimes. For example, whenever Fear spoke up, Kaidou's shoulder would suddenly twitch. When Konoha walked past, her body would stiffen unnaturally. Her changes in attitude were brief and subtle to the point that they were imperceptible unless one examined closely. Just earlier when Konoha was talking about the superintendent, she responded but did not make eye contact with Konoha. Furthermore, this unnatural behavior did not surface when she was dealing with Haruaki or Shiraho. That implied...

(Does she harbor further thoughts on Fear and Konoha's kind?)

Haruaki could only guess at the reason. The hint was probably what Kaidou had mentioned earlier—that she had been involved in a past incident. As much as he wanted to ask and clarify, but seeing as it was an incident related to cursed tools, Haruaki knew that happy memories were rather unlikely. Even if he were to ask, the time and place must be carefully considered.

"Hmm... What should I do..."

"Haruaki-kun, are you stuck somewhere? Maybe I can help you?"

Haruaki's thoughts slipped out. Hearing his words, Konoha smiled happily and leaned over. Haruaki did not dare reveal that he was actually pondering something unrelated to studying so he asked her questions about English sentence construction that he actually had some trouble understanding.

...Timing was the most important. There should be a chance to talk to Kaidou-sensei eventually. Although the matter of Fear and the teacher was very important, it did not change the fact that the exams tomorrow were crucial. In any case, Haruaki decided to study seriously for now while looking out for opportunities...

While thinking over these matters, Haruaki heard explanations of katakana English without registering, causing Konoha to scold him: "Are you actually listening seriously?"

Another kanji I don't know how to read, this is so annoying. Fear frowned and looked up:

"Say, Haruaki, how do I read this..."

However, Haruaki, whom she intended to rely on, was currently receiving Cow Tits' instruction on English. How could something so stupid be happening? As much as Fear felt an impulse to rush over and yell at them, she tried her hardest to suppress that urge. After all, when the time came, they were going to be the ones making fools of themselves as a result of such primitive English ability, not her. In any case, the most important thing now was to find out how this kanji was read. Thinking "in any case, I have the most reliable helper here," she turned towards Kirika, but found Kirika instructing Shiraho examination techniques in earnest. From Fear's perspective, she would feel bad about interrupting other people... Although Shiraho's slightly hollow gaze was a bit concerning.

"Hmm..."

Her eyes ended up drifting spontaneously to a certain person, also sitting on the tatami floor—The teacher guarding this group students.

Instantly, opposing thoughts crisscrossed Fear's mind.

One part of her mind muttered: "This is a great chance, go and try asking her." After all, this was neither chemistry nor mathematics but simply the reading of a kanji. Since she was Japanese and an adult, she should be able to answer.

But another part of her brain had a different idea, stammering timidly: "It's best not to ask her." Although she had no idea why, somehow she had apparently incurred the teacher's dislike, hence she did not want to confirm it specifically.

These two thoughts were almost equally strong and reached a stalemate, causing Fear to feel very troubled. Just as she was at a total loss—

"..."

They made eye contact for an instant but the teacher shifted her gaze away on her own initiative.

Fear thought: "I knew it."

She softly made an extended sigh but even she did not understand why she was sighing. Relieved? Disheartened? Scared? Troubled? Or disappointed?

(...Disappointed? Why must I feel disappointed?)

This was nothing. Indeed, she was not so fragile as to feel setback by this sort of thing. Because she had not done anything wrong, she could puff her chest out in pride and face the teacher. There was no need to feel concerned about such a woman. Just keep studying.

Fear comforted herself in this manner and intended to skip over the unknown kanji and continue studying hard. However...

The painful feeling in her heart ended up generating countless pairs of ominous questions and answers.

(—I've done nothing wrong? Really?)

(Or perhaps, I simply failed to notice?)

(Speaking of which, aren't you a tool that repeatedly perpetrated atrocious crimes since a long time ago—)

—Shut up!

Fear gripped her mechanical pencil forcefully, biting her lip hard as she pressed the pencil's tip on the notebook.

Currently, that was all she could do.

Konoha's English lesson did not last long. Perhaps feeling thirsty after talking too much, Konoha took the bottle of juice and poured it towards her cup—But the result left her puzzled.

"Oh... The juice is out."

"After all, with so many of us here, it's getting consumed quite rapidly. What should I do, go buy more? I'm actually fine with just having tea, however."

Just as this moment, Fear, who had been glaring solemnly at the notebook, looked up as though she were startled. Her face instantly brightened as though the situation pleased her.

"I'll go buy it! Yes, I was just thinking of a change of mood, leave it to me! Whatever else you want, I'll buy them all for you!"

"Hold on, you absolutely cannot be trusted with shopping. No matter how I think about it, you'll surely end up buying a certain crunchy type of object."

"That's right. Do you really think you're in a position to waste time? Up until this point, you still haven't asked me a single question. I'm feeling really concerned. Listen to me carefully, ariorihaberiimasokari—"

"Ooh! Cow Tits is trying to brainwash me with a mysterious incantation again!"

Hearing this dialogue, Kirika looked up from her textbook and said:

"Yachi, I'm fine with drinking tea as well... But since I'm the one imposing myself at your home, if you need anyone to run errands and go shopping, let me do it."

"Class Rep, you're a guest here, and besides, you're also busy teaching Shiraho, right? After all, having tea is fine so there's no pressing need to go out to buy—"

Halfway through, Haruaki thought "wait a sec." He suddenly recalled something.

"...No, we'd better buy some juice after all. Studying causes the blood sugar level to drop so it's best to have some kind of sugary drink. I should go buy some."

"Oh, wouldn't it be better to ask Kuroe and Sovereignty at a time like this?"

Konoha's suggestion was reasonable but Haruaki could not follow her advice at this time because it was a rare opportunity.

"Ah... But they're currently playing happily, it'd be a shame to interrupt their

fun. After all, the supermarket is just ahead, I was thinking of a change of mood too. Besides, this is my duty as the master of the house to entertain my guests. I'll go buy the drinks."

"I-I'm the one who wants a change of mood, so let me go as well!"

Fear endured Konoha's attacks of ancient Japanese as she spoke.

(She wants a change of mood huh?)

Haruaki could understand roughly what her reasons were. It was probably not simply fatigue from studying.

Haruaki stood up with a wry smile, stroking Fear's silver hair forcefully, almost treating her as support for standing up.

"That's not necessary. Why don't you stay here obediently and accept Konoha's instruction? You don't want to fail again and ruin your entire winter break with supplementary lessons, right?"

"Muu, but..."

Fear was still dissatisfied. Softly, Haruaki spoke a sentence to her that held multiple meanings on different levels.

"Don't worry, leave it to me."

Indeed. In any case, Haruaki hoped that Fear would let him handle things. This was an excellent opportunity.

Hence, Haruaki tried to look around the room as naturally as possible, taking utmost care not to let this action look like an act.

"Hmm, but if one person is willing to come with me, that would be a great help... Ah yes. Excuse me, Kaidou-sensei, I have an impolite request. If you don't mind, could you accompany me to go shop for drinks? After all, it would be best not to interrupt these girls who are hard at work studying. If you'll come with me, that'll be a great help."

Part 4

The two of them were walking along the way to the convenience store.

Haruaki had wondered if Kaidou might say "I must stay here and supervise" but unexpectedly, she readily went along with his suggestion. Perhaps she believed in the student's self-discipline while she was absent and accompanying Haruaki on his shopping trip.

Haruaki looked up to glance at Kaidou's shoulder as the firm footsteps of her sneakers trudged along the asphalt of the road. Although the school community was already used to the sight... Someone walking along the street at night with a shovel on their shoulder would look rather dangerous.

"...Kaidou-sensei, by this point, it might be a bit strange for me to ask this, but why do you always carry a shovel?"

"My apologies, I do not understand your question."

"What I'm saying is, isn't it more typical for PE teachers to carry bamboo swords?"

"Is that so? Well—If one really had to give a reason, it is purely my own habit. Simply the act of carrying it gives me a sense of calm."

"I-I see... A habit huh."

"I once worked at a construction site, so carrying a shovel everywhere I go should not come as strange, right?"

No, it's very strange. Although the thought entered Haruaki's mind, he skipped it and continued:

"...That was before you became a teacher?"

"Verily indeed. If I may supplement the explanation, this shovel was a birthday present I received from someone very dear to me. I would carry it to

the construction site every day and eventually I even kept it by my side even on days without work. Before I knew it, somehow it progressed to the point where I would feel completely unsettled without it by my side."

"I-I see, so its significance is actually that special."

"...Yes. It is currently substituting for a lucky charm—almost a part of my body now. Although there was no choice but to replace the tip due to wear and tear, the main portion has always been kept the same."

Did anyone in this world give shovels for birthday presents? Haruaki had never heard in his life that shovel parts were replaceable. Despite the numerous irregularities he felt an urge to point out... Seeing as this was a rare opportunity when Kaidou was willingly telling him these things, there was no need to deliberately say something displeasing, right? Thus, the two's conversation continued.

"Uh... Kaidou-sensei, would you happen to enjoy watching historical dramas?"

"W-Why? I don't really know how to answer. But your tone of voice when you often say things like 'verily indeed' sounds very historical drama-like..."

"Tone of voice, you say?"

The journey to the convenience store was even shorter than imagined. The destination loomed just ahead in sight. The pair continued to make their way towards the brightly lit area while conversing.

"...The foreman at that construction site was an elderly man. He loved watching historical dramas."

"Eh?"

"He could be considered our surrogate guardian, taking care of us whether in official or private matters. I probably picked up this preference for historical dramas while watching them with him. On further thought, I must have been infected by his manner of speech. I hope he remains in good health these days... We have arrived. Then I shall wait for you here."

"O-Okay. Then I'll be back soon."

Kaidou apparently knew as well that carrying a shovel openly inside the store

would not be a very sensible thing to do. Leaving her outside, Haruaki entered the convenience store and began to pick out juice, snacks and biscuits as appropriate. While naturally tossing a whole bag of rice crackers into the shopping basket, his mind was occupied by the conversation just now, of course.

(I never thought she'd tell me so much in such a relaxed manner... Since this is a rare opportunity, let me ask a bit more about her past on the way back.)

Haruaki swiftly checked out at the counter and exited the convenience store, carrying two shopping bags. Without saying a word, Kaidou took one of the bags from Haruaki's hand and started walking matter-of-factly. How manly.

Regretting the short distance of the return route for the very first time, Haruaki took a deep breath and spoke up:

"So... Kaidou-sensei. This question might sound very strange, but what's your opinion on Fear and her kind?"

Instantly, Kaidou stopped walking.

"...I can understand the reason why you are asking this question, so let me answer honestly."

"Thank you."

"In short—'No idea how to face them.' That is all."

Neither dislike nor hatred.

Simply no idea how to face them.

What was the meaning behind her choice of description?

At this moment, Kaidou resumed walking forward without looking back at Haruaki behind her.

"...They are good people."

"Since you say so, that should be true."

"Then why... Kaidou-sensei, do you feel that you have... no idea how to face them? Perhaps it may be related to your past? Like the incident you experienced before..."

Haruaki summoned his courage and tried asking.

Kaidou continued walking a few more steps in silence. Haruaki walked while waiting patiently...

"You desire to know about that incident?"

"Uh... Umm... I do. Only if you don't mind telling me."

"Actually, it is easily conveyed through two points. You are free to conclude on your own how they are related."

"Eh?"

"First point. My parents passed away very early on, hence, my younger sister and I have always lived by relying on each other."

At this moment, Haruaki was reminded of the construction site foreman that Kaidou had mentioned just now—Our surrogate guardian.

Of course, this was the first time for Haruaki to hear about Kaidou's family. But then all sorts of questions began to emerge in his mind. Such as, what was her sister called? How many years apart were they? Were they alike in appearance and personality?

Just as Haruaki was about to turn these countless questions into words, Kaidou continued as though interrupting his thoughts.

Her tone of voice was exceptionally calm, like clear lake water without the slightest ripple.

However, the words themselves were fully cursed.

"Second point. But currently, my sister is already deceased—The end. There is nothing more to say."

Haruaki gasped and held his breath. How the two points were related, it was so obvious that no thinking was required.

Because she had said that she experienced an incident "related to cursed tools."

Ah~ In that case—

The reason why her sister was no longer alive, vanished from this world, really

turned out to be—

Haruaki wondered "I should say something" but the current atmosphere did not permit him to do so.

Then Haruaki watched from behind as the teacher puffed out her chest and held her head high while walking ahead, rejecting all questions with silence.

Also.

In the next instant, a figure suddenly rushed out of a side street and crashed into Haruaki.

"Oof!"

A direct collision caused Haruaki to be sent flying flat on the asphalt. But the other person ended up in the same state as well. Upon closer examination, a petite girl was lying opposite to him.

"Ah... Ow ow ow..."

She was frowning while rubbing her backside desperately. The girl's hair was styled into two buns, one on each side of her head. Dressed in a public school's sailor style uniform, she also had a large side pouch at her hip. Perhaps either the girl was too petite or her uniform was too large, her fingers were hidden in her sleeves. Finally, due to falling on her bottom against the floor, her skirt was naturally flipped up, providing a full view of her thighs and other parts, clad in tights...

Haruaki frantically turned his gaze away and stood up.

"S-Sorry, are you alright?"

"Y-Yes, it's alright... It's Satsuko who should be very sorry instead..."

Her expression was as timid as a young puppy with the corners of her eyes drooping. Perhaps due to the pain in her backside, her eyes were slightly tearful. By this time, Kaidou, who had been walking ahead, noticed the situation and doubled back.

"...Any injuries, either side?"

"No, I'm fine here."

"Nothing, Satsuko is completely fine..."

"..."

Kaidou was stunned for some reason. Her eyes slightly widened, she was staring straight at the girl on the floor. But the girl was cocking her head slightly in surprise. It looked like they probably did not know each other... So what on earth was going on?

"Uh... So, since you're fine, please hurry and stand up. Otherwise, your posture is a bit embarrassing for me..."

"Eh? ...Wah! S-Sorry! Even seeing the panties of someone like Satsuko, you probably won't feel happy or aroused, right? So sorry! Please forgive Satsuko's lack of self-awareness!"

Haruaki held her hand and pulled her up to her feet while listening to her incomprehensible words. Just as indicated by the manner the sleeves of the uniform were hiding her fingers, she really was quite petite. Probably giving Fear or Kuroe a good run for their money. Furthermore, Haruaki noticed another thing when holding her hand—

"What's that?"

"This? It's a dowsing rod—"

The girl was holding a strange object in both hands. The handles resembled those hand grippers for muscle training and each was connected to four slender metallic rods that were roughly a meter in length. The rods extended horizontally in separate directions, comprising two sets, one in each hand... A total of eight metallic rods were protruding from between her fingers.

"...I only know about the type that uses two rods."

Just as Haruaki commented with a troubled expression, the girl's eyes shone as she answered:

"That's right, that is the usual type! But this one has eight rods, so in other words, it harnesses four times the power of two rods. For someone like Satsuko, this is an awesome and useful thing..."

"R-Really..."

Intimidated by her enthusiasm, Haruaki agreed half-heartedly. Was she the type who suddenly gets talkative regarding things she was interested in?

"Anyway, it's lucky you weren't injured. Although I have no idea what you're dowsing for, it's quite dark now so it could get dangerous if you don't watch carefully where you're going."

"Yes... Ah, right! Umm... May Satsuko ask something while she's here? Since it only concerns Satsuko personally, it might only displease you two as a waste of time and effort, but if possible..."

Her excessively masochistic attitude ended up making others feel bad as though they had done something wrong instead. Unfortunately, Haruaki's heart was not strong enough to dare say "No, excuse us but we must get going" and part ways.

"W-What is it?"

"Oh, thank you very much! Uh... Satsuko has been using this quadruple-powered dowsing rod to find someone, but for someone like Satsuko whose human abilities are of the lowest level, the effectiveness really turns out to be quite limited, in other words, fruitless so far... Or rather, Satsuko is hopeless with directions to begin with. Because she is too stupid to confirm that person's location, getting lost is only expected."

"Oh, so instead of treasure, you're looking for someone?"

"Yes. Umm, Satsuko's friend's friend's friend simply told Satsuko: 'By the way, I think I heard a rumor but I'm not too sure' that there's an amazing psychic nearby... Do you happen to know about this?"

Haruaki's face twitched. He had an ominous feeling. An extremely ominous feeling.

"You mentioned a psychic... I have no idea about that. But lemme ask just to be safe, do you... happen to have questions about... cursed tools or something like that...?"

Instantly, the girl jumped in fright then spoke frantically:

"Y-Yes yes indeed! Could it be... You're the psychic! So you can read the minds of someone like Satsuko? Ahhh, so sorry! Satsuko is so sorry for her unguarded ways!"

The young girl kept hugging her petite shoulders and worrying but then she looked up towards Haruaki. Her timid and tearful eyes displayed a sense of solemnity.

"S-Satsuko has something to discuss with you, please help Satsuko! Although Satsuko cannot afford to pay very much money, she really is in a tough spot. For someone like Satsuko who is so cowardly, she is really helpless with no idea what to do...!"

"No, I don't want your money!"

"Oh, so what you mean is that for someone like Satsuko, no amount of money is enough? Sob sob, in that case, she has no choice but to pay with her body...? Although it's quite troubling, Satsuko really has no other solution... Sob sob, Satsuko understands. But Satsuko is shy, if possible, she hopes she doesn't need to take off her clothes..."

Fallen into all sorts of mysterious and masochistic thoughts, the girl trembled as she grabbed her skirt and slowly lifted it up on the spot for some reason. Was she acting out of her mind due to confusion? Or was this her personality? Just as Haruaki decided he must stop her and frantically tried to take action—

"...! Come over here!"

"Uwawa, w-what!?"

Kaidou-sensei had suddenly regained her senses for some reason and dragged Haruaki by the arm into the alley where the girl had rushed out of earlier. Then she pressed him against the wall as though mugging him. Her eyes were more strict than usual, in other words, it was super frightening.

"I do not suppose you have been engaging in this type of activity all along to this date, have you?"

"I-It's a misunderstanding!"

"Is that so? Do you dare swear to the heavens, the earth and the gods?"

At this moment, a certain object was glinting at an extremely close distance—
The shovel was actually pressed against his neck.



"I-I swear!"

Haruaki's mind was in a total state of chaos. Excessively close, the teacher's breath was striking him in the face. Between them, they were only separated by the bulge beneath her tracksuit jacket. The metal edge of the shovel felt so very cold.

(Man, it feels as though things are getting more and more out of hand...!)

Feeling like he wanted to cry, Haruaki looked around his surroundings for help.

On the other hand, the girl remained rooted to the spot, apparently oblivious to the fact that Haruaki had been dragged into the alley.

"...Disappeared? Satsuko really ended up abandoned and ignored!"

Almost about to cry, she was frantically looking in all directions.

Part 5

Thinking "Oh well, let's just listen to what she has to say first," Haruaki brought the young girl home. In front of Fear and the other girls' skeptical eyes, the girl calling herself Ontenzaki Satsuko said:

"Actually... There's a ghost pursuing Satsuko!"

"..."

Everyone exchanged gazes over the table. This included Kuroe and Sovereignty who had returned to the living room at the news of a new guest. Even Shiraho, who felt uninvolved and had been burying herself in her textbooks, looked up with intrigue. Then Fear spoke on behalf of everyone:

"Hmm... Girl known as Satsuko, due to my stance of helping others, I really want to hear your request. But unfortunately, no one here has skills in exorcism, so you'd better find someone more suitable."

"N-No way!"

"Wait a sec first, I think she's omitted a lot of stuff. Didn't you mention cursed tools just now? Does that apparition have anything to do with cursed tools?"

"That's true. If it concerns a tool turning into an ghost or something, that would be understandable."

Konoha's remark prompted Satsuko to timidly incline her head in puzzlement. She shrank her petite shoulders even more and said:

"Uh—... It's not like that. It happened today after school..."

Hence, Satsuko began to explain the whole story from the start. While on the way home from school, she had suddenly met a stranger—a weirdo resembling a ghost—who attacked her. The weirdo also said to her: "You must have a cursed headless doll in your possession, hand it over now." However, Satsuko did not recall having anything like that. No matter how she explained, the

attacker refused to believe her, so she ran for her life. While being chased, she continued to flee, meanwhile trying to find someone who could help—

"Then Satsuko arrived here..."

"Did you say a cursed doll? How scary~"

"That's really scary~"

Kuroe and Sovereignty were nodding to each other with serious expressions. Apart from Satsuko and Kaidou, everyone else narrowed their eyes halfway in skepticism as though going "You two... You've got to be kidding me?" as they watched the two dolls.

Soon after, Fear shook her head lightly, having organized her thoughts and said:

"Anyway... If it's this kind of thing, I think we basically understand. Some mysterious person covets that cursed headless doll and attacked you, so you came running for help. That's what happened, right?"

"Yes... Uh—That person also used other names to call that doll... What was it? Something like the 'screaming and crying headless doll'..."

"This should be obvious, but we really have never heard of it... But let's put that name aside for now. What about you? Do you really have no idea at all?"

"Well said. That's the most important point."

Kirika and Konoha's words prompted Satsuko to furrow her brow hard.

"Well~ Entirely no idea..."

"Would it be something belonging to someone in your family?"

"Ah, that's what Satsuko wondered in the beginning~ Because grandma who passed away last year loved collecting antiques... But to this date, Satsuko has never seen that kind of doll, not even when going through her past possessions. Besides, Satsuko also called mother but she said she didn't know."

Much could be speculated from here. For example, her grandma might have possessed that doll in the past but could have given it away or discarded it. Of course, it was also possible that the grandma never had the doll in the first

place and the seeker was mistaken.

"This might be a tangent, but have any ghosts chased your mother?"

"Ah, no, she seems okay. Or perhaps the person already knows that Satsuko's mother never appreciated grandma's collection of antiques... Also, Satsuko's love for the occult is related to grandma's hobby. The attacker probably concluded from this that Satsuko must have received the doll from grandma."

"I see. In any case, if it's just an ordinary cursed doll, just giving it up obediently to end the harassment is another method... But if the object in question doesn't exist, there's no solution. What an absolutely ridiculous affair."

"Indeed. That's quite unlucky of you to be attacked. Say, what was the attacker like? Did they say where they came from?"

"No... Anyway, the person looked kind of fluttery like a ghost and kept repeating 'Hand the doll over, I will destroy it' without saying where he or she was from..."

"Hmm... This is useful information. Speaking of 'destroying,' it could very well be that rotten organization—The Knights Dominion."

Fear frowned with displeasure as she murmured. Konoha also slumped her shoulders dejectedly in agreement.

"Attacking someone indiscriminately in this violent manner does sound like their methods... Sigh~ Looks like we're going to have our hands full for a while."

"Y-You are all so amazing. Although Satsuko doesn't really understand, you all seem so dependable... So, what should Satsuko do next...?"

Even if she asked "what she should do next", no one knew how to answer. Haruaki's group looked at one another and discussed how Satsuko should proceed. Since they had no idea where the attacker was, waiting was the only option.

"Looks like we have no choice but to wait for the attacker to show up again then beat him up."

"Yeah, let's take turns to protect Satsuko-san starting tomorrow. But since I don't think the attacker will dare attack her among crowds in open daylight, I

think we can manage."

"Then leave it to me. In case anything happens, I have ways to help Satsuko escape. Also, I wasn't here to help when the Knights came last time, so I want to do something."

"If we want to resolve this as quickly as possible, there's also the 'baiting strategy.' Of course, the most crucial part is still ensuring her safety above all."

"S-Satsuko finds you all so amazing..."

Satsuko gazed in admiration at Fear and the rest as they discussed with enthusiasm. Naturally, she could not understand the details.

Nevertheless, Haruaki still found it quite unbelievable how quickly she got the idea without comprehending everything.

"Excuse me, it's great that you're discussing this incident with us, but have you called the police? I think a normal person would find it very strange if they heard about a 'cursed doll' all of a sudden, right?"

Satsuko jumped in fright then cowered delicately as she answered:

"Satsuko did not call the police... Even if the police were informed, they probably wouldn't believe it. Also, Satsuko thinks that ordinary people cannot defeat that ghost. Also, umm, putting aside why the ghost is chasing Satsuko relentlessly, Satsuko already knew about the existence of cursed tools... Is that strange?"

She cocked her head to one side slightly as she spoke the final sentence.

Haruaki was surprised. "So you actually knew about the existence of cursed tools all along?"—Before Haruaki had a chance to ask this question, Satsuko went "Ah" and clutched her head:

"Oh right, that is quite strange! Because Satsuko is a fan of the occult, she assumed that it was only natural for others to know about that area. Like the Hope Diamond, Tutankhamen's Ring, Busby's stoop chair, *etc.* But average people don't know, right? Sob sob, Satsuko is really quite weird, so sorry..."

"Oh, what the heck, so that's what's going on?"

Haruaki was slightly convinced. What she knew about did not include the

matter of excessively cursed artifacts taking on human form. She was apparently just a fan of the occult, having absorbed related knowledge about mysterious and strange occurrences from books or the internet.

"You said 'that's what's going on'... Umm, did Satsuko say anything weird...?"

"N-No, nothing at all."

In any case, because she was knowledgeable in related matters due to being an occult fan, she was unexpectedly accepting of these abnormal situations. Compared to an ordinary person's panic, this was less troublesome in a certain way.

But even though Satsuko had basic knowledge in this area, Haruaki felt that telling her everything would only make her more confused. He did not believe that Satsuko would readily accept the existence of organizations involved with cursed tools or the true identities of Fear and the others. In any case, it was enough for her to know that there was 'a weirdo target coveting cursed tools' and there existed 'a group of psychics who can oppose him'—namely, the people here.

"Anyway... You did the right thing in coming to us instead of the police. You don't need to over think the incident too much. I may not be very dependable, but these girls here are very trustworthy."

Then Haruaki suddenly recalled something.

"It's getting late tonight. If it's convenient for you, would you like to spend the night here? After all, it'd be dangerous to let you walk home by yourself during the night. That goes without saying especially when you have someone chasing you."

Fear and the girls went "Hmm!" without speaking and looked towards Haruaki. Although they did not object, somehow they all looked a little unhappy. As a side note, Kirika's lips were quivering as though murmuring something but she ended up not saying anything.

"...Uh—But..."

On the other hand, Satsuko was staring wide-eyed in surprise, her shoulders trembling with unease. Haruaki nervously added:

"Oh, that's really only if you find it convenient. If your family will worry, then don't force yourself. We'll send you home or try to think of another solution. Are your parents strict?"

"Ah~ Satsuko thinks that father and mother are... umm... probably the ordinary type..."

Satsuko bowed her head as though pondering something but quickly looked up again, still smiling in that timid manner of hers. Then with even more unease than before, she said:

"But... As long as Satsuko tells them, it should be okay, probably. Satsuko will call home later so... Umm... If you don't mind the trouble, Satsuko will be in your care..."

Haruaki smiled wryly and said:

"Of course it won't be any trouble. Besides, I'm the one who suggested it in the first place. My house's greatest advantage is its spaciousness. Don't worry and stay over tonight. You can relax."

"Th-Thank you very much... Or rather, very sorry that you need to treat someone like Satsuko with such gentleness... You are all wonderfully kind people!"

"You don't need to keep adding 'someone like' when talking about yourself. I already consider us kindred."

Fear spoke as she approached Satsuko and examined her body with a serious gaze, especially her flat chest. After grunting "Mmm!" in approval and nodding, she patted Satsuko on the shoulder.

"You pass! I permit you to join our alliance! Kuroe, you shouldn't have any objections, right?"

"Of course not. It's truly a joyous occasion for celebrating the birth of a new ally—"

"Eh? Eh?"

Satsuko watched Fear and the others' faces in surprise. Kirika shrugged, Sovereignty applauded happily while Shiraho continued her struggles with the

textbook as though nothing else concerned her. Then Haruaki secretly shifted his gaze to check out the last person's reaction.

Kaidou was still staring at Satsuko's face without saying a word.

Her eyes looked as though she were reminiscing.

Not long after that, Satsuko took her cellphone and left the living room. Just as she mentioned earlier, she was going to call her family. Haruaki wondered "Is it really okay?" as he waited for her to return, meanwhile moving his mechanical pencil habitually. But no matter how Satsuko's request for permission ended up, there was still another problem—The impending examinations were not going to disappear on their own.

However, while waiting for her to return, after a quite a duration—

Fear suddenly looked up at the clock from her noisy flipping of the textbook and said:

"Hmm, Satsuko isn't back yet? Isn't she taking too long?"

"Now that you brought it up, it really has been a while... Maybe she got into a lengthy argument with her parents. I'll go check on her."

Glancing at the supervisor, Kaidou, Haruaki stood up. He originally thought she might nag at him for interrupting his studying but unexpectedly, she turned out to have no reaction.

As soon as he left the living room, he heard tiny chattering from the other end of the corridor. Taking a look in that direction—

"...Satsuko already said, there's no problem at all! Yes... Yeah yeah. So—"

Satsuko's voice on the phone did not sound as cowardly as during her earlier conversation. Haruaki got the sense that she was less reserved when dealing with familiar people. Also, because she was less reserved, she did not need to hide the slight sense of anxiety mixed in her voice. Although it was only natural for her to have this kind of attitude seeing as her parents were on the other side, this stood in stark contrast to her masochistic and cowardly appearance earlier, giving Haruaki a sense of dissonance.

"Yes... Ah. U-Umm, wait a sec!"

Originally talking on the phone, Satsuko discovered someone approaching so she frantically covered the receiver and moved the cellphone from her ear.

"Sorry, did I disturb your call? Because you took so long, I was wondering if you're having some kind of argument with your family."

Haruaki lowered his voice but Satsuko instantly returned to her cowardly voice from before.

"Ah, Satsuko is really sorry... Uh—Umm..."

"In that case, perhaps it might be better if I greet your parents first as the master of the house you're staying at... No, wait a sec, even though I'm the master of the house, hearing a male voice might make them more worried. If your parents need reassuring, let me call Konoha over here to greet her in my place."

"N-No need, it's okay now! Satsuko just got permission! ...Oh no, if you guys talk to mother, she might reveal Satsuko's embarrassing secrets like 'that child was still wetting the bed even after she entered elementary school~'...! So please, Haruaki-san, you guys don't need to trouble yourselves with that, really!"

Haruaki thought to himself, "You already revealed it yourself, so it doesn't matter, right?" However, Satsuko seemed very embarrassed at the thought of letting Haruaki talk to her parents so she hastily pressed the cellphone to her ear again:

"So it's agreed! Thanks a lot!"

Then she hung up. Seeing Satsuko breathe a sigh of relief, Haruaki scratched his head and said:

"Uh... Well, since you've already got your parents' permission, that's wonderful. But is it really okay? Just now, it sounded like you were in some kind of argument with your parents?"

"Ah~ Sorry that you saw an embarrassing scene. Umm, because it was so sudden, Satsuko got scolded a bit, that's all."

That was hardly surprising seeing as a teenaged daughter was suddenly asking to spend the night away from home. Very few parents would actually be pleased, right? Worrying and getting angry about it would be human nature.

But Satsuko relaxed her expression and spoke at this time:

"However, they really gave permission~... This is Satsuko's first time staying out overnight so although mother was angry, she still agreed. She even nagged a lot and said: 'Don't make trouble for others' so Satsuko retorted against her a bit... Ehehe, anyway, it's lucky that mother gave permission."

"Really? This might sound strange coming from me as the person who suggested the stay over, but I think you should apologize to your mother when you go home."

"Satsuko will do that!"

Then the two of them turned around and prepared to return to the living room.

"By the way, you use honorific speech even when talking to your parents?"

"Sorry, it's Satsuko's habit. Is it very weird...?"

"No, there are people like that, there's nothing weird about it. It's just that personally, I could never imagine myself talking to Pops using honorific speech."

"Oh... So what kind of person is Haruaki-san's father like?"

"Eh? Uh—Well, I-I guess all I can say is that he's my bastard Pops..."

Chatting about unimportant topics like this, they returned to the living room and told everyone that she had already obtained permission to stay overnight. Originally worrying about Satsuko's lengthy phone call, Fear held Satsuko's hands tightly and welcomed her once again.

In any case, there was no problem with arrangements for the rest of the night. As for guarding Satsuko starting from tomorrow, coming up with a solution should not be too hard. Basically, the current situation could be summed up as "Okay, with this settled, we can _____ tonight without further worries" except that the blank involved a rather unpleasant activity. This sort of choice really was the worst.

Satsuko's school was also having exams soon, hence the study gathering resumed with her joining in as an additional member. She had described herself as a first-year high school student during her introduction, hence in a certain sense, this counted as rather serendipitous... Seeing her take out textbooks from her bag and staring at them petrified, Haruaki found her position quite similar to Shiraho's.

After the study gathering resumed, Kuroe and Sovereignty helped Fear and Shiraho massage their shoulders for a while before disappearing off somewhere again. Seeing the meaningful glances they exchanged with each other before leaving the living room, Haruaki could not help but suspect some sort of scheming in the air. Hopefully, they were not going to do something disruptive to people's focused studying.

Within the living room, one could hear Kirika patiently teaching Shiraho, Fear arrogantly asking about kanji she did not know, Konoha reminding her to pay attention to her word choice, as well as Fear pouting and starting a dispute with Konoha—Under such conditions, Satsuko suddenly cried out in joy.

"What's the matter?"

"Nothing... Satsuko just finds this home so lively..."

"I really don't know if I should call it lively or noisy, but yeah, that's basically the feeling."

"Ahahah. But Satsuko has never gathered in someone's home like this with so many people. As Satsuko told Haruaki-san just now, this is her first time staying overnight away from home... So, it feels very new."

She kept drawing meaningless black circles in her notebook with great fervor and smiled with a hint of loneliness. Fear and Konoha stopped arguing and stared at her with complicated looks on their faces.

Judging from their expressions, they were wary of asking Satsuko something inappropriate. Hence, Haruaki pointed to Fear and the girls' faces with his pencil and deliberately spoke to Satsuko on their behalf:

"...If you find this experience new, then just relax and enjoy it. Although you can't think about fun all the time when studying, at least you can relax and get

along with them here."

Satsuko was taken aback with surprise but she instantly smiled and said:

"Yes, Satsuko will do that. Satsuko hopes to become good friends with them..."

Fear also smiled at this moment as though her expression had caused a chain reaction. Nodding as though saying "Leave it to me," she said:

"Yes, building friendly relations with a fellow ally is of course my greatest wish. By the way, Satsuko, I can teach you if you have any questions about English. Feel free to ask as much as you like. Or perhaps, you find it tiring to study in someone else's home? If that's the case, you can take a break."

"Uh—But everyone is studying so hard, if I take a break by myself, it's a bit..."

Just at this moment...

The paper door leading to the veranda was suddenly slid open—

"Hello, everyone, thank you for waiting. As customary, the beautiful cheerleaders have arrived!"

Saying weird things as usual, Kuroe appeared. Gazing blankly, she clapped her tiny hands together loudly in front of Fear and everyone else.

"We have heard everything—Let us handle things here."

"Let you handle things...? What are you going to do?"

"Well, simply stated, I just want to suggest that everyone take this opportunity to rest for a while. A suitable break can extend concentration for longer... There shouldn't be a problem, right? Teacher."

Arms crossed before her chest, Kaidou only glanced with her narrow eyes and consented with a single sentence.

"...Fair enough."

"Yes yes, so!"

Kuroe instantly spun on the spot meaninglessly. Once Kirika and the rest who were dumbfounded by her sudden appearance had turned their attention to her, Kuroe pointed to the other other end of the living room—the entrance by

the corridor.

"My bosom buddy Sovey-chan will try her best to perform a live show to help everyone relax. Enter stage~"

"Coming coming~ Everyone, you've worked so hard~"

As the paper door slid open, a maid appeared before everyone's eyes, smiling in an even more laid back manner than Kuroe. She was carrying a tray in her hand with many teacups containing a white liquid.

"Ehehe, you didn't actually need to go out just to get juice—But because I wanted to give everyone a surprise, I didn't say anything... Uh—I've brought specially prepared drinks to help everyone recover from your fatigue! It contains ingredients like yogurt and honey! Please drink these and continue studying hard!"

"...!"

Instantly, apart from Kaidou and Satsuko, the same formula surfaced in everyone's mind.

Sovereignty + Tray + Unfamiliar house = The Usual Result

This formula embodied the legitimate logic everyone agreed on, naturally—

"—Hyaaaaaaaaa!"

Sovereignty tripped as her toe got caught on the door frame. The tray flew into the air, sending the teacups flying as well.

Many of the teacups fell down by Sovereignty's feet but a number of them were flying towards the table where Haruaki and the others were sitting. Konoha swiftly caught one barehanded while Fear used both hands to catch two cups that were about to crash into the table. At the same time as those two, Kaidou also took action.

"Hmph!"

With a sharp breath of exhalation, the color of steel raced instantly as her black hair fluttered behind her. Next, Haruaki was confronted with the sight of Kaidou kneeling forward with the shovel extended, the teacup balanced stably on the tip like a circus act.

Then.

As though in mockery of their valiant efforts—

"Oh no! Ah~ As expected, given the luck of someone like Satsuko, this result is only natural—"

"...Thank you, Sovereignty. I'm delighted by your kind intentions... Yes, very delighted indeed..."

The two final cups which no one managed to catch had struck Satsuko and Shiraho directly. Their hair, face and clothes were all drenched soaking wet by the spilled juice.

Shiraho and Sovereignty were no longer present when the living room was finally cleaned up, because they had gone to take a bath. Although Sovereignty did not need a bath and despite Shiraho's look of awkwardness, she could not harden her heart to refuse Sovereignty's tearful plea: "I must apologize to you no matter what, so at least let me help you scrub your back!" Sovereignty had also extended the same offer to the other victim Satsuko but squeezing all three of them in a bathroom would be too cramped. Furthermore, Satsuko refused desperately, saying that "there's no need for you to go that far!" Hence, she went over to use the bathroom at Kuroe's room instead.

Currently, the living room was back to studying mode except for the absence of the bathing group. However, Haruaki keenly detected something peculiar about the mood. Wrong, there was clearly something wrong with this mood.

Whenever Haruaki reached out to pour some juice, Kirika glared viciously at him. Whenever he scratched his head and thought "how do I solve this question~?", Fear would glare with widened eyes and grip her Rubik's cube hard. When Haruaki spontaneously stretched, Konoha stood up and emanated a murderous aura as though warning him "Don't even think of going there!"—The three girls were monitoring his every move.

Ever since Satsuko's arrival, Kaidou's hell guardian mode had become even more intense than when the study gathering first began. In charge of supervising the proceedings, she could not remain silent at the sight of this

situation of course.

"Ueno Kirika, you girls are acting very on edge right now. You must concentrate!"

"Yes, but I am concentrating, in fact, I've never concentrated more than now. But I'm sorry to say, this is a very important matter...!"

Kirika spoke with unusual vigor while Fear and Konoha nodded firmly in agreement.

"...Is that so? I have no idea what this matter is, but if you say so, there must be some sort of extenuating circumstances?"

Thus replied the teacher. It was hopeless, Kaidou-sensei was way too oblivious in certain ways. Haruaki gave up on relying on her.

Haruaki was not the only one who felt as though he were sitting on pins and needles. Bored to death because her playmate Sovereignty was not around, Kuroe was feeling the same as she killed time by curling up someone's textbooks.

"Cough cough, I'm feeling thirsty... Let me go to the kitchen."

"Take this juice if you're thirsty. Very well, take a good gulp of that."

"Hmm, Kono-san, you're such a demon... I understand why you're bothered about Haru, but why are you involving me as well?"

"Shiraho-san and the others are guests at our home so there cannot be any lapses in hospitality... In any case, it is absolutely impossible for there to exist people barging into the bathroom for fun or immoral males trying not to miss out on Shiraho-san and others taking a bath in our house. Logically speaking, those kinds of people absolutely cannot exist in this house... Fufufufu!"

Konoha's glasses flashed as she chuckled in a terrifying manner towards everyone present. Haruaki was so frightened, his shoulders shrank together. Why was he distrusted to such an extent?

Whatever, after all, he had no intention of peeking at them in the bath in the first place. I'll just wait here without a fuss until Shiraho and the rest finish their baths. Surely, that'll regain Konoha's trust in me—Just as Haruaki mustered his

concentration to get back to studying, Kuroe refused to give up.

"Hmm... Giving up on Sovey-chan's side is a tough choice, but having Sacchi taking a bath here is also a rare occasion—After all, facing each other naked in the bath with nothing to hide is the best way to enhance mutual affection. I've always advocated that."

"Kuroe-san, are you still going on about that? If you barged inside, all you're going to do is grope others. Hence, not allowed."

"Your word choice is too deplorable, I raise my objection. Of course I'm not going to grope, I'll just touch... Very lightly and gently. But also very passionately!"

"Isn't that the same!?"

Fear suddenly looked up and made an "Oh right" kind of expression, gazing at Kuroe as though she had remembered something.

"Enhancing mutual affection... Really? Hmm~ I'd really be at a loss if she keeps making that kind of face all the time. This could very well be a great opportunity..."

Fear murmured to her self then suddenly stood up.

"I just realized I got splashed by the juice just now, so it's sticky unless I wash up. I'm gonna take a bath to rinse myself clean, but I don't wanna use Cow Tits' bathroom that's oozing with a dairy cow's essence—So, Kuroe, lemme borrow your bathroom too. I'll entrust you with the mission of monitoring the shameless brat!"

Without waiting for Kuroe to reply, Fear ran noisily out of the living room. Haruaki and the others exchanged glances and smiled wryly in secret. After all, anyone could tell that Fear had not been splashed by the juice at all.

"Okay, then I'll go help Ficchi..."

"Like I said already, Kuroe-san, you may not go. Speaking of which, packing three people in that bathroom is physically impossible, so please abandon your notions."

"So mean, this is total discrimination—"

Konoha caught Kuroe's collar as though she were capturing a cat. Kirika lightly brought her face close to Haruaki and said:

"...I knew it a long time ago... But Fear-kun really has a kind heart."

"It's not like she isn't going to grope either, but at least it'll be better than Kuroe."

As Haruaki shrugged, he heard the sound of slippers coming from the yard out front.

He understood what Fear was thinking. She must have recalled the lonely expression that Satsuko made when mentioning how new it felt to be gathered with so many people. There was also her wish to become good friends with everyone. Hence, Fear took initiative to reduce their distance and get along harmoniously. It was definitely a good thing.

(...Good luck, Fear. You're in charge of the first step.)

But at the same time...

Haruaki also wished she could apply that kind of initiative towards the teacher as well.

Hence he took a sideways glance at Kaidou.

Looking as though she had not heard Fear, she was simply resting awake with her eyes closed.

Chapter 2 - She Could Not Sleep Through the Moonlit Night / "The twofold rejection under the moon."

Part 1

Fear made her way to the second floor of the accessory dwelling and entered Kuroe's room. It was a narrow space meant for a single tenant. According to Haruaki's description, its layout was the same as a rented apartment.

Having visited many times before, Fear was quite familiar with the place. Taking off her slippers lightly, she entered and gently opened the door next to the bathroom, opposite to the dressing table. Inside was the cramped changing area and washroom sink. From behind the plastic door, Fear could hear the sound of the shower and water filling up the tub. Since Satsuko probably would not have known how to do it on her own, Kuroe probably instructed her.

"Well... then..."

If she did not act quicker, Satsuko could very well finish her bath. Hence, Fear quickly undressed.

(Hmm... Right, lemme try out what Kuroe did to me before.)

A lot had happened when Kuroe returned from her traveling, including a sudden intrusion when Fear was bathing. It felt quite nostalgic now. Although Fear had rushed here, powered by initial enthusiasm alone, she did not know exactly how to interact through mutual nudity. But in order to achieve her goal, Fear decided to use Kuroe's method despite not being fully convinced that their

close relationship stemmed from that naked encounter in the bath (after all, quite a lot had happened after that). At any rate, since Fear did not dislike the feeling, she could at least offer Satsuko the chance to experience the same sensation.

Hence, her intrusion was quite sudden, of course.

"...Freeze! The Ladylike Bosoms Alliance's surprise inspection officer has arrived together with the steam—!"

Fear pulled open the plastic door and entered the bathroom.

She met gazes with Satsuko who was currently in the middle of her bath.

Satsuko widened her eyes in great surprise and froze her movements, even holding her breath. In other words, time stopped in this instant.

But that only lasted a few short seconds. As soon as she took her next breath, time resumed flowing in the bathroom—

Then.

Fear obtained a reaction opposite to her intended goal of better relations.

"Ah... Hee... Iyaaaaah!"

Recognizing Fear, Satsuko screamed loudly and turned away. Not only that, she even grabbed the towel that was originally hanging on the wall and clutched it tightly, covering her lower abdomen as she sat down with a splash, her back towards Fear—

The unexpected result caused Fear to pause, only staring at Satsuko.

She saw faint traces on Satsuko's back—numerous... scars.

"Y-You, those are...?"

All sorts of old scars of varying sizes. However, the majority of them were only visible if one looked closely. But at such short range, they entered into view even if one did not look intentionally. The scars were distributed over Satsuko's trembling shoulders and fully covered Fear's view of her back. Only her arms

and legs were free of obvious scars, which was why none of her scarring could be seen while she was clothed.

Then after some time, while facing the wall, her shoulders trembling, Satsuko spoke in a tiny voice that trembled her entire body:

"S-Sorry... Satsuko, Satsuko..."

"Why are you apologizing? Calm down first before speaking."

Satsuko's voice stopped. Fear stood in the same spot, waiting for Satsuko to finish. Indeed, waiting for her to calm down was the most important thing first. A minute or two passed with them not making a sound apart from their breathing—Satsuko then spoke softly again as though remembering something.

"...It doesn't... hurt, because these are old scars. If you were frightened, then umm... Really sorr—"

"I can tell by sight. I was frightened a bit, but that's all... Right, so where did those scars come from?"

Facing the wall, Satsuko started wrapping her body in the towel that was originally in her hand. Apart from her shoulders and the base of her neck, the scars were all covered up. Perhaps finally calming down, Satsuko exhaled "Phew." Then with a voice that had recovered its calm more or less, she started speaking while still facing the wall:

"Satsuko, umm... In the past, it happened a long time ago... Satsuko was once... bullied."

"Bullied?"

"...Yes. When Satsuko was in elementary and middle school. After all, Satsuko is just like what you can see... Not only without a single virtue but also useless and cowardly. Probably because of these reasons, it's natural for someone like Satsuko to get bullied. Hence no one helped Satsuko... The bullying was tragic. Even going as far as... all sorts of unspeakable acts Satsuko does not want to say."

"...I see, then you don't need to tell me."

Fear felt extremely angry for some reason, as though her rising wrath would

explode. Unforgivable, she could not forgive certain people who were not present.

Although Fear had told Satsuko she was not obliged to talk about it, her narration did not stop. In a soft voice as though wanting to scrape off the remaining scabs from her body, Satsuko continued:

"Even children know how to use all sorts of clever tricks~ They rarely harmed the obviously exposed arms and legs, only targeting places that were not obvious. Then, in fact, the most serious scar is on Satsuko's abdomen. It is Satsuko's largest scar, the most disgusting scar, the most painful scar also—So, this is the one and only scar that Satsuko does not wish for anyone to see at all... Umm, Satsuko is really sorry for screaming just now..."

Only now did Fear realize why Satsuko had refused vehemently when Sovereignty proposed to scrub Satsuko's back as an apology earlier. For someone who gave off such a timid impression, the surprising fact that she was able to resist Sovereignty's shameless insistence apparently stemmed from this reason.

"...I should be the one apologizing. I barged in without knowing you had that kind of reason for refusing company in the bath. Sorry."

"Eh... Oh no, you don't need to apologize~ It's Satsuko, it's all Satsuko's fault —"

After so long, she finally turned around and displayed those downward slanting eyes and timid smile that Fear had already gotten used to. Her hair was already let down from her twin buns style and displayed a mildly wavy texture after getting soaked. She resembled a puppy that had been drenched in the rain.

Hence, Fear began to ponder, pondering how she should proceed. End things with just an apology? No. What should she do next? Instead of her, if Kuroe were here, or if Konoha were here, or if Haruaki were here—What would they do?

The answer came immediately.

"Okay, I get it. I'll keep everything I heard just now a secret... Don't worry, I'm

quite tight-lipped when it comes to secrets. Anyway, back to the subject at hand, have you washed your hair?"

Fear smiled.

Surely, that was what they would have done. If Haruaki or any of the others were here instead, surely, that was what they would have done.

These words seemed to have gone beyond Satsuko's expectations, causing her to blink frantically. Since she did not answer, Fear urged her one more time:

"I'm asking you, have you washed your hair?"

"Eh... Eh? Not yet, umm, Satsuko was just about to wash it."

"Really? Then that's perfect. Why don't you sit here?"

There was a stool in the corner of the narrow bathroom which Fear dragged over with her foot. Then she pulled Satsuko's hand forcefully and invited her to sit on it. Perhaps still at a loss what to do, she simply allowed Fear to sit her down with her back towards Fear.

Thinking "speaking of which, I've had my hair washed by others before but this is my first time washing someone else's hair," Fear pressed down on the dispenser and began to rub the shampoo gently between her hands to produce lathering.

"U-Umm, what are you doing..."

"Can't you tell? I'm gonna wash your hair for you. Please just sit there and don't move."

"Y-You don't have to do that—!"

"Don't be shy. Or rather, I'm all prepared already, so you have no right to refuse. Fufufu, I will do it gently and you'll feel very~ comfortable..."

By this time, Fear's hands were covered with suds and everything was ready. But just as Fear was about to touch Satsuko's hair, Satsuko suddenly turned her head back.

"Umm... I-Is it really okay...?"

"What, you're not willing? I've already told you that you have no right to

refuse, so no matter how unwilling you are, I don't intend to stop."

"N-No, it's not because Satsuko is unwilling... But Satsuko is worried whether Fear-san might dislike doing this kind of thing... Umm, after all, since Satsuko is this kind of person, you might find Satsuko very disgusting—"

This nonsense again? Fear frowned, grabbed Satsuko's head and forcibly made her face forwards. Then Fear first massaged the top of Satsuko's head—

"I don't find you disgusting because I've gotten used to seeing human scars a long time ago."

"But..."

"Right, you can continue wrapping the bath towel around you if you want. Although I don't really mind them, you don't want others to see them, right? If you want to wrap yourself, I'm not going to take it off... Even if it gets wet, I guess Kuroe wouldn't get mad. Let's search under the sink later. There should be spare towels for drying our bodies. It's just a shame that I didn't get a chance to help you wash your body. But let's leave that for next time. Today, I wanna try to wash someone else's hair successfully."

"..."

Satsuko did not answer, perhaps because she gave up.

Fear filled Satsuko's hair with suds as she recalled how Kuroe moved her fingers when she washed Fear's hair before. This feeling was completely unlike washing her own hair. For some reason, she felt increasingly happy as she went about with the task. So that was what Kuroe was feeling at the time? Conversely, that also meant that Satsuko should be experiencing what Fear herself had felt back then...

"Oh... This is the... first time... for Satsuko to do this..."

Hearing Satsuko's tone of voice that sounded like she were having a sweet dream, Fear felt relieved and smiled wryly at the same time.

Proudly, she moved her fingers rhythmically even more. Although her technique was not as good as Kuroe's, she did wash her own hair every day so it should not be that bad, right?

"How is it, does it feel nice?"

"Yeah, very nice... Right, Satsuko never knew that having someone wash her hair would feel this nice~ Because no one ever washed Satsuko's hair before... Satsuko, even when she goes on school trips, is always alone... So she never experienced... this kind of feeling..."

School trips. Fear recalled Haruaki or someone else mentioning them. If her memory served her correctly, it was a special event organized by the school, a trip where all students from every homeroom in a year group would participate. They were very fun—supposed to be very fun—events. However—

"You're... always alone?"

"Yeah... But it's fine. After all, Satsuko is already used to it."

Fear closed her eyes for an instant.

"...How could anyone get used to it? I was like that in the past, so I know. Being alone is suffering."

Fear recalled that dark space, abandoned and neglected in the underground chamber as well as the endless loneliness and silence. If it were really possible to get used to it, then she would not have suffered so much or felt so lonely. Neither would she desire company so much.

Satsuko did not answer for some reason, perhaps because Fear's view bothered her.

"...I'm rinsing now."

Fear turned the shower head while she used her hand to comb through Satsuko's hair, rinsing it clean of suds. Naturally, the bath towel wrapped around Satsuko's body became soaked but it did not matter. If anything, the sight of the soaked towel clinging tightly to her body was rather concerning, on the other hand. Somehow it felt super shameless... If Haruaki were to see it, surely there would be nothing worse than that.

"Phew~ Thank you very much... Although Satsuko doesn't understand why a bath would turn out like this, Satsuko really enjoyed it... Umm, umm, Satsuko's body is already clean..."

"Yeah, all that's left is a soak in the tub. I feel the same way. This is a rare chance, so let me help with that as well."

Next, Fear abruptly wrapped her arms around Satsuko from behind while she was still sitting on the stool, picking her up by supporting her thighs. Fear went ahead because she knew that Satsuko would definitely stutter in her reply if she tried to seek consent.

"H-Hyah—! U-Umm, what exactly are you trying to do? By the way, are Satsuko's legs making an M-shaped posture in the air—?"

"Hey, don't move unless you want to fall."

Holding Satsuko in her arms, Fear stepped into the tub and sat down into the water whose level was just right. Although this bathtub was a size smaller than the one in the main residence, it was still possible to squeeze two people inside for a soak provided they were pressed intimately together like this. Fear could feel Satsuko's body firmly on top of her, but that could not be helped.

"Wawa... Th-This won't do! Not only is it too cramped, the bath towel shouldn't get soaked in the water..."

"But aren't we both submerged in the tub already? Besides, the towel was all wet already, soaking it in the water won't make any difference."

"Oh no~ That's not quite the same... After all, this is manners. If manners are not followed, surely Satsuko will get scolded..."

What nonsense are you saying? Fear wondered to herself.

"Hmph, if you don't like following manners, then it's fine even if you don't follow them. You don't need to care if Haruaki, Kuroe or Cow Tits say anything. I'll take their scolding for you."

"Ah..."

The bathwater splashed about. Within the narrow tub, Fear could feel the soft sensation of Satsuko's skin. From her position, all she could see was the back of Satsuko's dripping wet head. After a while, she heard a tiny voice coming from there.

"Why... are you willing to do so much for Satsuko...?"

"You don't need to overthink things. I just want us to get along better."

"Oh... Satsuko... is so happy. Who knew there would be people who are willing to do this for someone like Satsuko—Furthermore, even willing to listen to the wishes of someone like Satsuko, going as far as offering assistance... It really feels like a dream."

Someone like Satsuko.

Hearing her repeat that phrase over and over again, Fear thought to herself.



Satsuko had always been alone so it was only natural that no one offered her a helping hand. Hence, she was already used to that kind of state and decided on her own that her existence was lowly.

How lonely that must be.

"...I will help you, so please rest assured."

"Okay..."

Indeed. Fear wanted to tell her that not having anyone to assist her was not the natural state of things.

No matter what kind of enemy appeared, Fear was absolutely going to protect her.

Fear updated her plans while exhaling "Phew~" as she enjoyed the water's temperature which was just right. At the same time, she also remembered what she still needed to do.

"Yes, by the way, I originally came here to conduct a surprise inspection. Let's start now."

"Eh? N-No way, the chest of someone like Satsuko is not worth checking, right?"

At this moment, the inspection officer invoked her plenary authority and ignored Satsuko's opinion. Reaching out from under Satsuko's armpits, Fear vigorously groped her chest through the wet bath towel.

Inspection result...

Fear had lost by a slim margin.

Part 2

Wanting to go to the washroom, Haruaki had left the living room and heard the sound of the door sliding open at the entryway. Fear and Satsuko had returned from Kuroe's room. Naturally, having just taken a bath, both of them were in a state of moist hair and reddened skin. Satsuko was wearing a set of pajamas provided by Konoha. Of course, it ended up quite loose on her and not too easy to walk in. In terms of size, Fear's would be a better fit for her but Fear did not have any spare clothes for Satsuko to wear as pajamas.

As soon as she saw Haruaki's face, Fear glared angrily and said:

"Hmm... What are you doing here!? Your goal is Shiraho and Sovereignty's bathroom, right? In other words, you're trying to peek! You want to peek, right!?"

"I'm going to the toilet! Jeez... What kind of person do you girls take me for? Whether Konoha or Class Rep, as soon as I said I'm going to the toilet, they all want to follow. Don't I even have the right to go to the toilet in peace?"

Haruaki half narrowed his eyes as he spoke. Standing beside Fear with her hair wrapped in a towel, Satsuko giggled. What was going on...? Say, had her expression livened up subtly? Or perhaps, her comfort level increased? Maybe Fear's plan worked out very smoothly.

Haruaki tried to communicate "Good job!" to Fear with his eyes, but she rudely replied: "W-What's with your creepy smile, it's disgusting..." and even backed away.

At this moment, it occurred to Haruaki that Fear getting closer to Satsuko was a good thing. But despite being a good thing, there was still a lingering problem. In that case, Haruaki decided to discuss it briefly here with Fear first.

"By the way, Fear, I need to talk to you about something."

"Oh okay, then Satsuko, you should return to the living room first."

"Yeah, sorry about that... Be careful you don't catch a cold immediately after taking a bath. If you need anything else, please feel free to ask Konoha or the others."

"Oh, thank you. Then Satsuko will go on ahead first~"

Satsuko bowed and made her way to the living room. As soon as she was out of sight, Fear crossed her arms before her chest and asked aggressively:

"Okay... What do you want to talk about? No way, you want me to assist you in peeking on Shiraho and Sovereignty...? Hmm, you must be thinking about that. But if you offer a reward of something like ten rice crackers, of course I won't be able to refuse no matter how much I try to insist... You're too devious! Well, if it's twenty rice crackers, I might consider it!"

"Seriously, could you stop letting your delusions run wild in that direction!? I'm talking about the issue with the teacher!"

Hearing Haruaki's answer, Fear pouted slightly and turned her head to one side.

"I have nothing to say about that woman. Ever since the study gathering began, the only thing I realized so far is this... She's really avoiding me deliberately after all. But the problem is that I've completely no idea why, so I don't even know how to solve it. Neither do I have any particular intent to resolve the situation."

She was right. Fear could not possibly figure out why she was being avoided no matter how hard she racked her brains. Haruaki sighed softly and said:

"During the shopping trip for the drinks, I tried asking her a bit but didn't get any details. But let me emphasize beforehand, even if I tell you now, you won't be able to resolve the situation."

"...I don't quite get it but I'll willing to hear you out. Go ahead."

"How should I put this...? Didn't the teacher mention that she was involved in a cursed tool incident before? Also... Her younger sister apparently died as a result."

"Ah..."

Fear's eyes revealed unease and even flashed the color of despair for an instant. Soon after, she swayed her silver hair and slowly leaned back against the corridor wall, bowing her head as she murmured:

"R-Really? In that case, that makes sense... For her to have that kind of reaction... That she would dislike... Resenting me, it's only to be expected..."

Her voice was almost impossible to hear unless one listened carefully.

Haruaki could imagine what was going through her mind right now. She must be thinking that belonging in the same category of existence as the object that had taken the teacher's younger sister's life, it was only natural to be resented.

Thinking "how troubling," Haruaki scratched his face and said:

"But the teacher didn't say anything about disliking or resenting you."

"...?"

"All she said was that she had 'no idea how to face' your kind."

Nothing good would come out of jumping to conclusions that the teacher disliked or resented her. Perhaps realizing this, Fear went "phew" and relaxed her expression, but her eyes were still filled with loneliness.

"...'No idea how to face' huh? I guess it's the same for me."

"Hmm?"

"It's the same for me before. We probably got along so awkwardly because I had no idea how to face the teacher either. Although I didn't hate her—but facing a teacher whose thoughts were unknown, I was at a loss at what attitude to take. It's still the same now. Once I return to the living room, I'll definitely experience the most awkward feeling ever, because there are even more unanswered questions now. Facing a human who suffered from misfortune caused by my kind, what should I do? What sort of expression should I make towards someone like that..."

Haruaki did not know the answer either. However, the most important issue at hand was—

Haruaki reached out gently and caressed Fear's silver hair as usual.

"At least now I know that you both have no idea how to face each other. Then let me ask you a question... One that I often ask. What are your plans? You probably want to improve your relations with the teacher, right?"

"Muu..."

"Be honest!"

Haruaki lightly patted Fear on the head as she pouted. In the end, she sighed in exasperation and said:

"Well... Fine, I'm not going to delude myself into thinking we could become as good as friends... But at least, I hope she could treat me like all the other students... That'd be nice."

"Is that it?"

It was quite fitting of Fear's style, a roundabout manner of wording things. But at least, Haruaki knew that it came straight from her heart.

"In that case, I must help you lots... What should I do..."

"Me...?"

"Hmm?"

Haruaki bowed his head to see Fear saying awkwardly:

"W-What should I do...? J-Just curious what you think."

"Well... That's very simple."

Haruaki looked towards the living room entrance as he recalled how Satsuko looked when she went inside and said:

"Actually, it's the same with everything else. The principle is to avoid forcing things but try to approach her should any opportunity come up and try to shrink the distance between you two, isn't that enough? Something like what you did with that Satsuko girl, didn't it end quite successfully?"

"...Hmm, that's true... Yeah. But the particulars of what actually happened, that's a secret."

"You mean girl talk? You don't have to tell me... Anyway, don't overthink the matter. I'll support you in various ways too. In any case, try your best and good luck."

Haruaki began to tap Fear's head rhythmically again, causing her to frown and go "muuuu" with displeasure. As much as incurring her anger was not his intention, but seeing the worries disappear from her eyes as a result, it was worth it.

Fear violently pushed Haruaki's hand away from her head as though protesting "Don't go tapping my head so casually!"

"A-About the issue of how she treats me, I simply think that's not a bad idea. So I was just asking out of curiosity, umm, you don't need to worry at all! Rather than worrying about me and the teacher, shouldn't you prioritize protecting Satsuko or preparing for the exams? Don't waste your thoughts on strange matters—Besides, aren't you going to the toilet? Hurry up and go! I'll watch and make sure you enter!"

"No, you don't need to watch me enter!"

Fear desperately pushed Haruaki from behind in her embarrassment. Haruaki did need to go to the toilet after all, so he walked in that direction along the corridor. Just at this moment, voices could be heard from over there.

"Hmm? It's coming from the bathroom..."

"Maybe the changing area's door wasn't shut properly?"

"Really? Then it must be shut tight—No, hold on. You wait here for me. Don't move if you still wanna live!"

"I want to live, so I'll be waiting here."

Haruaki raised both arms to surrender completely. Staying on high alert, Fear kept looking back at him as she slowly approached the changing area. The voices became even clearer. Apparently, not only the changing area's door but the bathroom's glass door was also not shut tight either. Considering Sovereignty, this was not out of character for her. Then there were the voices coming from inside...

"Okay, Shiraho, open up a little more... I'm putting it in...!"

"Mmm, I'm ready... Mmm..."

Apart from their talking, there was also the familiar noise of water flowing in the bathroom.

Haruaki instantly froze completely. What on earth were those two doing...?

Bath room, guaranteed full nudity, lovers together, Sovereignty's ability to transform to male. While these facts kept swirling in Haruaki's mind, the sounds from the bathroom did not stop.

"Mmm... Huff... Umm, hold on, Sovereignty..."

"Need a break?"

"Yeah, a break would be nice... You keep putting it in so forcefully, it's a little uncomfortable."

"Ah, I'm so sorry. Because it's my first time doing it in this kind of place, I feel so excited."

"Seriously, you leave me no choice. But then again, this is quite new to me too... Okay, that's enough of a break. Sovereignty, carry on, I'm ready..."

"Got it... Let's not get the bathwater dirty, so be careful."

"Fufu, don't worry. Letting any of it drip out would be too wasteful. Give it all... to me..."

Haruaki gulped hard. Crap, this was totally not good.

"Uumu, what are those two doing inside the bathroom...? Anyway, the door inside needs to be closed too."

"Ah~ Hold on, Fear!"

Haruaki reached out and tried to stop Fear but of course, he could not catch her. Right before his eyes, she quickly barged into the changing area. Just as her silver hair disappeared from sight—

"Kyah! D-Don't peek!"

"I came to remind you that your voices can be heard outside, so shut the door

properly! By the way, what are you two doing?"

"U-Umm, uh..."

That was all Haruaki could hear. Perhaps they lowered their voices? Or his mind suffered an information overload? He could not catch the remainder of the conversation very well.

Soon after, Fear returned. Slamming the changing area's door shut behind her, she crossed her arms before her chest in a completely "impressed" manner and nodded "Mm-hm" to herself.

"Hmm~ That looked quite fun..."

"W-What—? Y-You saw it? Did you really see it?"

"Of course. What's with your unease? I'm gonna try it out next time too."

"N-No way no way! I forbid it!"

"What~ Why not!? I won't carelessly drip any of it. Enjoying a nice drink of ice-cold juice while taking a bath, don't agree that it's one of the pleasures of life? I wanna try it too!"

"...What?"

As the pair looked at each other, Haruaki finally calmed his mind...

"Uh~ Fear, could you please describe the scene you witness in the bathroom again?"

"Sovereignty had brought her specially prepared juice. Without requiring Shiraho to do anything, Sovereignty was feeding her by delivering the drink to her mouth. She said that this sort of princess-level treatment was necessary to express how sorry she was... Hey, Haruaki! Why are you suddenly clutching your head!?"

"Nothing... Sorry, I was wrong just now. I'm too much of an idiot..."

Fear cocked her head like an innocent little animal and wondered in amazement:

"? I don't really get what you're saying but you've always been an idiot. There's no need to hate yourself for that, right?"

Back in living room, although they had already discussed about Kaidou, Fear could not possibly take proactive measures suddenly as a result. She probably still lacked courage although she was sneaking peeks at Kaidou with greater frequency. Of course, Kaidou still had not changed her hell guardian mode. Despite his disappointment, impatience would not help—In any case, Haruaki had no choice but to open his textbook and study.

By this time, Shiraho and Sovereignty had already finished their bath. Since her clothes were not caught up in the spill, Sovereignty continued to wear her maid outfit. To wash up the teacups she had used during the bath, Sovereignty had gone to the kitchen with Kuroe.

On the other hand, Shiraho was wearing clothes borrowed from Konoha. Unlike Satsuko, she was dressed in casual clothing instead of pajamas.

"...What are you staring at? Watch out or I'll murder you, human."

"N-Nothing, I was just wondering why you changed your hairstyle after a bath..."

"Because wet hair is very annoying, just as annoying as having a human stare at me with perverted eyes."

Shiraho went "hmph" and swinging her long hair, rarely seen tied up, she returned to the table side. Perhaps trying to make the most of her studying time, she had a very serious expression. Her cheeks were faintly red from the bath she had just took. Haruaki already knew that her complexion was very pale to begin with, so this was quite a refreshing look for her. Furthermore, the clothes Konoha lent her did not fit too well after all, with excess fabric hanging loosely near the neckline. Whenever she leaned forward towards her notebook, the situation was especially precarious—

Death glares—

Suddenly, Haruaki surveyed his surroundings to find three pairs of half-narrowed eyes, filled with murderous intent.

"Hmm... O-Okay, time to study, study..."

Haruaki buried himself in his notes as though to avoid those stares and moved his mechanical pencil. The study gathering went hush again, leaving only the quiet sound of Kirika instructing Shiraho.

However, this quiet duration only lasted a few minutes when Fear suddenly collapsed on her notebook directly. Having taken a bath as well, her concentration had apparently reached its limit after all.

"Hmm... So much suffering, this is too much suffering. Oh how I wish the exams could start right now so that I can be free of this suffering. Then once exams are over, I can play to my heart's content..."

"That's everyone's wish too, so you should study hard right now."

Answering Fear in this manner, Haruaki glanced over at Kaidou who seemed as though she was going to remind them not to chatter idly. But perhaps one could say just as expected? She was simply staring from her spot, staying completely still. Hence, Fear did not stop talking.

"Oh by the way, we still haven't used those tickets we received from the sports festival. I almost forgot them... What place are those tickets for, anyway?"

"Stop chatting idly. Anyway, I did hear from a friend... It seems to be a swimming pool facility located at the Hitsutou Grand Hotel. It's supposed to be quite a fun and high-class place."

"What, a swimming pool! That sounds really nice, I must go there and have fun!"

"But you can't swim at all, right?"

"That's why I must go! After all, I'm so bright and clever, I'll surely master swimming with practice! It's decided, we're going there to unwind once exams are over!"

"If you really think it's okay, I have no objections. After all, those tickets seem to have an expiry date, so it'd be a shame if we just let them expire... But unless Satsuko's problem is resolved, I don't think we can go, right?"

Konoha's reminder prompted Satsuko to speak up timidly:

"Oh no~ So sorry, someone like Satsuko had to cause so much trouble for everyone..."

"Don't worry about it, once the enemy appears, we'll put an end to things. Our visit to the pool can count as a celebration for resolving the incident as well. Why don't you come with us as well? ...Oh no, of course, only if you want to. Oh right, it's not convenient for Kirika either. Or maybe we should find some other place..."

Fear seemed to be cutting herself off because she thought of something, meanwhile sneaking glances at Satsuko and Kirika from time to time. Haruaki also understood what Fear meant about Kirika, having fun at a pool was probably not too convenient for her. However, Kirika looked up and pondered for a while before giving a surprising answer.

"...A trip to the pool huh? Well, I don't mind either. There should be a solution, probably."

Satsuko also thought for a long while as though considering something, but in the end, she smiled timidly and nodded:

"Umm... If you don't mind going with someone like Satsuko, Satsuko would like to go very much...!"

"Hmm, it's okay?"

"It's okay, no problem. Satsuko wants to go to a pool like that very much. Satsuko's parents have friends working at a travel agency or something like that, so tickets can probably be obtained too..."

"Really? That's great. But what's inside your pouch there? Why is it bulging so much?"

Satsuko suddenly showed a very happy expression and said "Oh, this—" Then she picked up her pouch by the table and began rummaging through it. Although it seemed like everyone was going off track, having reached the limits of their concentration, Kaidou remained motionless as though she were sleeping with her eyes open. Trying to object, Shiraho clicked her tongue disapprovingly but Fear and Satsuko did not seem to hear.

"Satsuko loves all occult goods and is especially attracted to things that

people don't have—like this foldable quadruple-power dowsing rod, this set of tarot cards from the Heisei era, or this portable Ouija board..."

"I-I don't really understand these things, but it's quite astounding."

Piled on the table were all sorts of strange objects. Fear looked at them suspiciously but one particular object caused her to frown. With especially vicious claws, covered with signs of having been patched up, a pair of hollow eyes that could only be described by the word "evil"... A stuffed doll that resembled a teddy bear (apparently).

"Hmm, aren't you carrying a doll? Perhaps the enemy is looking for this...?"

"Eh? Oh, but this 'Markgraf Kriemar' isn't the doll they're looking for. Satsuko only obtained it recently from a claw vending machine because its intriguing appearance pulled at Satsuko's heartstrings. Besides, its head is firmly attached to its body anyway—"

Satsuko explained as she turned the doll's head. The twisted face looked even more terrifying. If one were to imagine the noises this bear made, it would definitely sound something like "Gukyo gukyo... Kehihihi!"

Next, Fear asked Satsuko to tell her fortune using the strange tarot cards.

"Uh... The reversed position is 'Telephone Fraud'... This represents 'Familial Love,' 'Truthful Word' and 'Visible Things.' Then speaking of where this card appeared... Ah, it's the upright position of the 'Digital Terrestrial Television Broadcast'!"

"W-What? Is that good or bad?"

Haruaki sighed, stopped the movements of his hand and looked up at the living room clock. It was quite late already. As though things were wrapping up, Konoha was stretching, causing her bosom to quiver as a result.

"This is pretty much it. For the remainder, as long as you don't get confused by the deliberately tricky questions, you should be fine."

"Okay... I understand, I should be... fine... I guess..."

Kirika also seemed to be pretty much done with her teaching. Shiraho exhaled "phew" deeply and began to close up her textbooks.

"Yachi, everyone's depleted their concentration. Today's study gathering should end here."

"You're right... If we fail to get up tomorrow morning, all our efforts would end up meaningless. Do you agree? After all, well~ we've basically done everything we're supposed to do."

"...By the way, Shiraho-kun, what are your plans now?"

"We're going home, of course. If we hurry, we can still catch the last train. Even a cab ride is fine. In any case, I do not wish for Sovereignty to stay in this house overnight... I cannot imagine what the foolish human might do."

"Oi!"

Stop talking like I'm some kind of beast. But for some reason, Fear and Konoha nodded vigorously in agreement as though they were saying "You're completely right!" This caused Satsuko, who was intending to stay for the night, to retreat delicately and ask:

"I-Is it really that dangerous...? Then Satsuko may have made the decision too recklessly...!"

"Don't believe their nonsense! Rather, I should ask you girls to stop saying these scary things!"

At this moment, Kirika coughed and cleared her throat.

"However... It is only natural for Satsuko-kun to feel uncomfortable staying over at the home of someone she only met the first time and of the opposite gender as well. Speaking of which, nothing wrong happening so far might only be a matter of luck but that doesn't preclude something happening for the first time tonight... Although it's absolutely ridiculous, in order to ease those doubts, let me take action immediately."

"What, even you, Class Rep...!"

Just as Haruaki expressed his objections, Kirika ignored him and cast her gaze towards the side, her arms still folded before her chest. As though agitated over something or nervous, her index finger was drumming away lightly against her arm.

"W-What I mean is... This is only an analogy. Should there be someone else in the same position as Satsuko-kun, if someone who normally doesn't stay overnight were to accompany her as well... That might be a good solution perhaps. In that case, that should be able to slightly ease Satsuko-kun's discomfort at staying at a stranger's home for the night. Furthermore, by sleeping in the same room, that someone could act as a deterrent against nocturnal assaults. S-So... Let me clarify beforehand, because I am the class representative, for the sake of preventing a classmate from committing crimes, I have no objections against taking on this duty, in other words—"

"I concur with Ueno's idea."

At this moment, an unexpected person spoke up—Kaidou who had been listening silently to everyone's conversation.

"Although I am aware of the extenuating circumstances here, as the teacher, I cannot ignore the fact that a girl from another school is staying over at a male student's home. In order to prevent any crimes from occurring, I shall sleep in the same room with her."

"What!?"

As Kirika was dumbfounded, Kaidou watched her with eyes of disbelief. Then she asked simply:

"Is there any problem? In my view, a teacher is more suited to this duty than a student."

"...Nothing. Kaidou-sensei, you're completely... right..."

For some reason, Kirika slumped her shoulders in disappointment and sighed bitterly. Haruaki could not understand why, but she seemed to be giving off airs of "missing out on a rare opportunity." Why was that?

In any case—

"Then I shall stay here and impose on your hospitality. No need to prepare meals or a change of clothing for me. Do not trouble yourself with formalities."

Faced with Kaidou's serious words, Haruaki and the rest could only exchange looks with one another silently.

They originally thought they could free themselves of the tension brought by the teacher once the study gathering was over—

But clearly this notion turned out to be too naive.

Part 3

Even in a dream, the scar on her face still hurt.

(...Satsu.)

The name of her younger sister surfaced. The image of her smile surfaced. The image of the flower hairpin surfaced, a memento from their deceased mother, one that the sister often wore. Also surfacing were her downward slanting eyes like a puppy's, her timid smile, as well as the way she apologized over every little thing.

That was perhaps partially responsible for her current dream. The pain of a similar wound, stirring up old memories.

Nevertheless, the rest of the responsibility definitely lay in the student's inquiries. The pain from an old scar, stirring up old memories.

Stirring up old memories she did not wish to recall.

Fragmentary scenes flashed across the depths of her eyes. The damaged satchel. Once upon a time, the pair of sisters had stopped bathing together. A chik-chik sound. Timidness. A slightly dirty boxcutter. A chik-chik sound. A morning as usual. Just as she looked back and said "I'm off on my way now" yet there was this chik-chik chik-chik chik-chik chik-chik chik-chik chik-chik chik-chik chik-chik...

Lingering pain. The flashing blade. The searing pain as it slashed across her cheek.

A lingering scar. Under madness' control, in the next instant, the younger sister had recovered the light of sanity and reason in her eyes, miraculously yet like a curse. Understanding in despair that she had harmed her elder sister, her heart was filled with fatal regret.

Then what lingered was mourning.

As she looked down at her younger sister's dark red body resulting from a jump off the building, she felt in her heart—

The pain of the wound on her cheek. Painful, wounded, mourning.

The pain chastised her for being weak. Chastised her extremely weak self for the errors she had committed.

Had she been strong enough, could she have saved her younger sister?

Strong enough to protect anything, to be aware of everything—

Yes, hence.

That was why she wished she were strong.

She knew it was already too late, but if it could serve as compensation, if it could serve as her atonement for the younger sister who had lost her life, manipulated by the little understood phenomenon of curses.

She must become stronger.

Hence, she had to become even stronger, much stronger, ever stronger.

(I must... become stronger...)

Indeed, stronger, stronger. She had to become stronger, stronger, stronger and even stronger, so that she was capable of protecting a certain person this time.

Haruaki woke up to an urge to go to the washroom, probably because he drank more juice and tea than usual during the study gathering. Due to having less time to sleep than usual, he had wanted to sleep all the way till morning without interruption... But having woken up already, it could not be helped. Half asleep, Haruaki walked to the washroom and finished his business, in a half-asleep manner of course. Just as he shut the washroom door behind him, he suddenly heard a faint but strange noise.

The noise of something rigid... Some kind of "knock."

"...?"

Haruaki could not help but feel bothered. Hence, instead of returning to his

room directly, he circled over towards the veranda next to the living room. That was where he thought the noise had come from.

Tiptoeing, he advanced towards the veranda. In terms of seasons, it was already winter which meant that the glass door to the veranda, usually kept open, was of course shut during nighttime. The moonlight streamed in through the garden and the glass door to the veranda, illuminating Haruaki's feet extremely faintly. Using that natural lighting, with some difficulty, Haruaki arrived before the guest room where he had brought Kaidou and Satsuko earlier—

(Woah!?)

Kaidou was right there. Like a guardian protecting this room, she was sitting in front of the paper sliding door with her eyes closed. Her body was leaning slightly against one leg whose knee was drawn up while her other leg was in a cross-legged posture. Naturally, resting on top of that leg was the shovel she was holding one handed. Very likely, the knocking sound earlier was caused by the shovel striking the floorboards for some reason.

(W-Why is she sleeping here...? And dressed like that...!)

Kaidou was not wearing her usual tracksuit. On top, she was wearing a short-sleeved gym t-shirt while on the bottom—nothing except underwear. Illuminated under the faint moonlight, her long and slender legs remained white and pristine in color. Her long, sleek, black hair provided a certain fantastical contrast against the whiteness of her raised knee.

Should he leave while pretending he saw nothing? Or as a matter of principle, remind her to "Be careful you don't catch a cold"?

Just as he was caught in a dilemma, Haruaki suddenly saw Kaidou's eyes open forcefully.

"—A nocturnal assault? Vile fiend!"

"Eeek!?"

Haruaki instantly found himself grabbed by the collar with the back of his head shoved against the glass door. Naturally, a shiny, glimmering shovel was also pressed against his neck. Although this was like a replay of the scene during

their return from the convenience store, there were some differences. For example, the teacher was wearing nothing but a t-shirt, or the fact that her bare thighs kept approaching, or the murderous intent occupying her eyes was completely different, or the saliva on the corner of her mouth, *etc.* Haruaki decided there were plenty of things he should pretend he did not see.

"N-No! I wanted to find out because I heard a strange noise! I swear, I'm not someone who wants to die that badly...!"

"Hmm."

Her eyes still a bit sleepy, Kaidou scrutinized Haruaki from head to foot. Only after repeating that motion a great number of times did the shovel finally leave Haruaki's neck.

"...I see. You are wearing clothes. That apparently rules out a nocturnal assault."

'Is that what you base your judgment on!?' As much as Haruaki wanted to retort back viciously, he decided not to escalate the matter. While trying hard to keep Kaidou's appearance (especially her lower half) out of his view, Haruaki said:

"By the way, why are you outside the room..."

"I am on night watch. But if someone remains awake inside the room, it would hinder the other person from sleeping. Even if she is already fast asleep, any noise might wake her up. In that case, I should stay outside."

"Night watch...? But you were asleep just now, right...?"

"No, I was simply resting my eyes."

Kaidou-sensei was giving a childish excuse. No good, Haruaki really felt compelled to point out the situation of her drool. But even if he pointed it out, she would probably just say "...That is sweat" and wipe it clean.

"It is not that I distrust you, but having made the decision to protect her, I shall therefore protect her. For the sake of fulfilling that responsibility, even staying all night outside the room would be nothing."

Kaidou was serious. Undoubtedly.

In actual fact, Haruaki already knew. Even though she had dozed off just now, she must have stayed awake until that point, right? Relying on her serious resolve, she had poured her entire heart and soul into staying vigilant against uncertain nocturnal assaults or other threats.

All this for a girl whom she only met today and was not even a student from her school.

No matter how serious her personality, this was not reasonable, right? Was it really worthwhile for her seriousness to go this far? Indeed, perhaps—

"Is there some kind of reason... here?"

"...What are you trying to say?"

"I'm referring to how seriously you declared your intent to protect Satsuko, Kaidou-sensei."

The mood changed. Beneath the faint moonlight, Kaidou shifted her gaze away.

Haruaki could feel that her gaze carried the same emotion as when she was staring at Satsuko during their first encounter.

Reminiscence. She was reminiscing about past events, reminiscing about things that existed no longer.

But ultimately, he had no proof. This was merely a gut feeling. Haruaki also did not know if he should probe the issue any further. Nevertheless, since the teacher only responded with sighs and silence, he had no choice but to inquire.

"...May I ask if this has anything to do with your younger sister, Kaidou-sensei?"

Kaidou answered. That is, if one could consider words spoken towards the moon as an answer.

"Why do you ask? Does this simply stem from curiosity?"

"No, I'm just..."

Just what? Haruaki was only certain that it was not curiosity. Perhaps he wanted to find out why she was avoiding Fear and others of her kind? Perhaps

he wanted to know the reason behind her saying she had 'no idea how to face them'? Perhaps he wanted to know what could be done to address that issue? Perhaps he hoped she could improve her relations with everyone else? These reasons were all true, but somehow, Haruaki felt that there was more to it.

"I just feel that... You seem to be forcing yourself to do something, Kaidou-sensei, and you look very agitated. As a result, I wonder if I could help in some way... That's all."

"Help me... Is that so?"

A faint smile could be seen on Kaidou's face.

Except that it was unclear who or what she was smiling at.

Then she proceeded to—

"Then allow me to ask you instead, Yachi Haruaki. What can you do? Even if you know that my younger sister was a timid seven-year-old who always carried a helpless smile on her face, considerate enough to save up her pocket money to buy a shovel for her elder sister's birthday, a victim of bullying but did not dare send any distress signals to the aforementioned elder sister who was weak, only using a cursed boxcutter, which remains full of mysteries to this date, obtained through unknown means for unknown reasons, to harm herself madly, finally despairing over the fact that she harmed her elder sister, thus proceeding to end her own life... After knowing about the story of Kaidou Satsu, how do you expect to help me?"

"...!"

Her voice remained smooth and very calm throughout the entire time, but her words carried a sense of heaviness that delivered a severe blow to the listener—as well as a curse so vague that it was unclear whom it targeted, except that it undoubtedly existed.

When Haruaki regained his senses, he found Kaidou staring straight through him without smiling at all.

Her cold gaze was simply bone-chilling.

"I know what you are thinking and why you wish to probe deeply and

understand my past. But you cannot help me at all. Just as I have said earlier about having 'no idea how to face them,' even I myself have no idea how to face them at all. Matters whose reasons are unknown are impossible to resolve, right? Whether for me or for you."

Haruaki felt a severe dryness in his throat but still answered reflexively.

"...Since you don't know the reason and you have no idea how to face them... Then couldn't you just decide make the first move and approach them. Isn't that a solution too? Isn't it possible for you to discover that the situation turns out unexpectedly to be different from what you originally thought?"

"However, it is also possible that I will become further at a loss on how to handle the situation."

Without a single moment's pause, Kaidou argued in a completely emotionless tone of voice.

Then she sighed lightly.

"Besides... I have never prioritized the resolution of that problem. For me, there is only one important matter. Everything else is insignificant in comparison."

"...What do you mean by important matter?"

Just as Haruaki asked, Kaidou's hair slid forwards and backwards. She was nodding. Perhaps trying to secure her hair or some other meaning, she reached lightly towards her hairpin—

"The matter of becoming strong. Because I do not wish to ever fail again at protecting something important because I am too weak."

That seemed to be what she had already decided. It was also one of the answers she had given in the beginning of this conversation.

Seeing shades of her younger sister in Satsuko, Kaidou sincerely wished to protect her as a result.

To Kaidou, there was probably an experimental element to this. Ever since she lost her younger sister, she must have been trying to make herself stronger. And in actual fact, she had been strengthening herself all this time. This

experiment aimed to verify her condition and prove the correctness of the direction she had chosen.

"Hence—although it is not very fair for you, I absolutely cannot accept your wish. Because I do not consider it capable of serving as a force to make myself stronger. I have no wish to do or say anything... No, I have one more thing to say. Although as a teacher whom students look up towards, I should not be saying this. However, it is currently neither school time nor working hours after all. If I may be allowed to express myself personally as Kaidou Imi, then there is one more thing I wish to say."

"What may that be...?"

Haruaki gulped and asked.

She answered very swiftly. Without avoiding eye contact with Haruaki, her merciless eyes did not display any warmth—

She uttered only a single sentence.

"—Do not get in my way for such inane matters, that is all."

Very clear rejection.

According to her value system, neither establishing better relations with Fear and the others nor trying hard to achieve that goal were among her options. In other words, she had no use for such behavior.

She had cut herself off completely.

With nothing left for the two of them to discuss, they could only stare at each other. Time seemed as though it had stopped, but it could not be allowed to freeze indefinitely. Very soon, the moonlight quivered slightly. The chilly air flowed lightly and—

"Need to pee..."

Pulling the paper sliding door open, Satsuko exited the room, causing the tense atmosphere to disappear completely. Haruaki almost felt like collapsing on the spot like a leaking balloon.

Satsuko stumbled slowly around, her eyes 80% closed. Perhaps due to the poor fit in size, her pajama pants had slid all the way down to her hips. It looked rather precarious.

"S-Satsuko, it's dangerous if you don't watch carefully where you're going... Uwah!"

The warning proved futile as she fell towards him. Seeing her about to hit the floor, Haruaki reflexively caught her in his arms and supported her body. But perhaps because her legs lost strength, Satsuko ended up collapsing into a sitting position on the corridor. Maybe the impact woke her up completely and Satsuko blinked repeatedly—

Then her entire face went red. Intimate distance. The arms wrapped around her body. Her pajama pants that had slid down. These various facts were combined in her just awakened mind to produce the following conclusion—

"S-So after all... This feels like you're demanding payment...? If you don't mind Satsuko's skinny, weak, flat-chested body and ordinary face—It can't be helped. After all, Satsuko is a weakling so it's only natural for her body and mind to be exploited... When casually visiting the 'Super Robot Fortune Telling' website before going to bed, Satsuko already had a feeling this would happen. The keywords for Satsuko's destiny today are 'Pilder On!'^[1] Oh, this slogan seems to be suggesting a fusion of bodies no matter how you look at it...!"

"It doesn't! Anyway, you're mistaken! Look carefully, this is the corridor!"

"...You really came for a nocturnal assault after all!?"

"Kaidou-sensei, you saw this girl fall over on her own, didn't you? Why are you suddenly suggesting that possibility!?"

Just as Haruaki countered with his question, the slamming sound of a paper door being slid open could be heard from somewhere in the house. Indeed, since it was currently late at night, none of the other occupants in the house could have missed the current noisy racket.

Konoha was the first to make her appearance. Her eyes flashed behind her glasses, glaring as sharply as knives. She was swiftly approaching from the veranda. A few seconds later, Fear also rushed out of her room next door and

slowly approached as though advancing side by side with Konoha.

Death.

The only word surfacing in Haruaki's mind was this word. He must find an excuse... No, perhaps he should flee first. Who could help him? —Just as Haruaki turned his head, looking for assistance, he caught Kuroe jumping down from the accessory dwelling's window in the edge of his view. Only then Haruaki realize he was mistaken.

Konoha glared viciously at Haruaki then proceeded to walk past him. Fear also stomped on Haruaki in a most natural manner and walked past him as well. Next, the two girls fully opened the veranda's glass door together. Indeed, Fear and the girls had not rushed out for the sake of teaching Haruaki a lesson—

"The enemy is here, though I've no idea how he found this place."

"Maybe he followed you guys on the way home? Waiting until everyone had gone to sleep before making a move, what pains he must have taken."

Fear and Konoha murmured softly, in direct contrast to the sharpness in their glares. Hearing their exchange, Kaidou also went "Hmm...!" and made a groaning sound from her throat. Then she suddenly turned around.

Appearing before their eyes was an intruder.

Seeing the figure standing on the top of the boundary wall, Satsuko murmured to herself.

"Oh, it's the ghost."

Part 4

Naturally, the intruder was no ghost but a tangible threat.

Under her very large cape, her upper torso's attire was difficult to describe—but she was wearing some kind of cloth. The obviously female bulges were sloppily wrapped in fabric. Perhaps it really might be the *sarashi*, a long strip of cloth worn by samurai and women under their kimonos historically. However, the fabric was not wrapped tightly and securely like instances in school delinquent manga and the excess portions were even fluttering in the wind. Despite using quite a few strips of cloth, her upper body was wrapped no lower than the navel. As for her lower body, she was wearing a pair of super-short shorts that flashed in and out of view along with long boots which stretched all the way up to her thighs. In Haruaki's view, she would be better off wearing long pants in the first place.

Ignoring her attire, the most concerning part of her appearance must be her face. After seeing her, it was obvious why Satsuko would call her a "ghost." Beneath her messily cut hair, there was a rectangular sheet of cloth covering her face from her forehead to her mouth. The way she looked, she should not be able to see in front of herself.

"Haruaki-kun, you guys stay inside. Kuroe-san, I'll leave you to guard this place."

"Understood. Kono-san, Ficchi, be careful."

Kuroe walked towards the outer edge near the veranda while Fear and Konoha descended to the garden. The two girls closed in on the figure who was standing on the wall.

"You're the one who kept pursuing Satsuko relentlessly, right!? I order you to come down!"

"..."

The cape, the clothing and the veil on her face fluttered as she descended. Judging from the mouth revealed under the moving veil, at least she was not a monster missing a face.

Although the enemy was unarmed, Fear and Konoha did not let down their guard. They readied their battle stances and proceeded to demand answers:

"You're from the Knights Dominion, right? Name yourself!"

"...Indeed, I am a knight from the Frontline Gathering Knights Dominion. My name is Fourteen Coonsberry."

The intruder's muttering answer sounded rather androgynous. Without witnessing her bulging bosom or her smooth and tender thighs, one might easily be confused by her gender especially given her use of *ore* to refer to herself.

The enemy who called herself Fourteen turned her head slightly. Judging by her motion, she seemed to looking towards Haruaki's group at the veranda—So even with that piece of cloth over her face, she really could see properly?



"...Hand over the «Crying and Screaming Headless Doll»!"

Because Haruaki was shielding her behind his back, Satsuko poked her head out and said:

"S-Satsuko has already told you many times, although Satsuko knows that you won't believe someone like Satsuko, Satsuko really doesn't know anything about that kind of doll! If Satsuko knew, the doll will be given to you. Umm, right, please tell Satsuko! What kind of thing is it? If Satsuko has any ideas, she will instantly answer—"

"...Simply stated, give it to me. If you continue to hide it, I will force you to talk by any means necessary."

Fourteen stepped forward as though interrupting Satsuko. Naturally, Fear and Konoha stood in her way.

"Hmph, looks like you can't be reasoned with. If you are willing to believe her, then we'll allow you leave unharmed!"

"Aren't the Knights impossible to reason with by default? That said, I don't recall ever talking properly with that group of sadistic freaks."

"Fear-in-Cube and Muramasa, my orders do not include destroying you. If you two refrain from interfering in this matter, I will let you off."

Fear closed her eyes for a moment as though recalling something. It was as though she was recalling something to brand upon her heart once more. Then she opened her eyes and smiled fearlessly at the same time:

"No way, because Satsuko asked us to protect her. So I will tell you now—If you agree to leave without a fuss, we'll let you off, Knights Dominion!"

"...Simply stated, your reasoning is incomprehensible."

She stroked her veil with her fingertips as though combing a ponytail, perhaps in exasperation. However, Fourteen did not stop moving and slowly closed in on Fear and Konoha. Just as Haruaki gulped and said: "Do you best, girls", Satsuko pulled the back of his pajamas forcefully and said:

"I-Is it really okay? That ghost really is a ghost. Although Satsuko was busy fleeing and didn't remember clearly, she was able to make all sorts of strange

things appear—!"

"O-Oh, is that so? Right. But don't you worry. How should I put this? ...Yes, I remember saying this earlier. These girls are psychics who are even more amazing than me! Also, they're gonna perform moves that might be just as strange... But these are all secret techniques of psychic powers that cannot be disclosed to the public. We'll really appreciate it if you can keep keep what you see a secret."

Speaking of which, Haruaki still had not explained Fear and the others' true identities to Satsuko in detail. Perhaps there was going to be a chance to tell her eventually, but for now, Haruaki decided to convince her by depicting the battle as "psychics versus the ghost-like monster." At this moment, Kuroe shifted her blank gaze slightly—

"Yes yes, I'm actually a psychic too. For example, I am using the power of my guardian spirit, Her Augustness of the Sleek Black Hair, to provide a perfect defense here, so don't worry. But to avoid angering the great guardian spirit, please keep things a secret."

"A-Although Satsuko isn't sure what kind of guardian spirit that is, the name sounds very amazing...! Satsuko understands. Even if someone threatened to rip her mouth open, Satsuko won't tell anyone!"

"Thank you. Anyway, no matter what, these girls are quite strong. You don't need to worry."

But to be honest, Haruaki was not completely at ease. Even with two against one, the enemy might not be defeated so easily... If the other side turned out to be as fanatical and insane as Peavey.

Just as Haruaki turned his gaze back to Fear and Konoha, he suddenly noticed that Kaidou was watching him from the side. But instantly, her gaze drifted over towards the garden again.

What did her gaze mean? After a bit of thought, Haruaki understood.

There was definitely no particular meaning. She simply reacted to a specific word and looked over reflexively.

Indeed—namely, the word "strong."

"..."

Kaidou did not glance at Haruaki again, instead pursing her lips as she gazed at the enemy in the garden. Although she did not say a word, the shovel handle, gripped in her hand, was making a knocking sound.

Perhaps those were the words she wished to express.

"...«Geist»..."

Fourteen muttered emphatically in front of Konoha and raised her arm lightly at the same time. Instantly, blue-white light shone around her right arm for but an instant like the lingering brightness from a flash of lightning. Just as the momentary brightness disappeared, a long club appeared in Fourteen's hand as though conjured by magic.

No, rather than a club, it would be better described as a block of wood, a rectangular piece of timber just large enough to grip in one hand. But judging from the ragged surfaces on its two ends, one could tell how sloppily chosen and decrepit a weapon it was.

(Hmm, where did she obtain this kind of thing...?)

As the block of wood attacked, Konoha reflexively imbued her hand with a blade's sharpness and countered with a karate chop. Accompanied by a deep and heavy sound, both sides bounced back from the impact. Slightly surprised, Konoha readjusted her combat ready stance. From what she felt through her hand's sensation, the wood was not impervious. However, it was highly unusual for the wood to match her knife hand equally for a moment. Clearly it was no ordinary block of wood.

While Konoha contemplated these issues, Fourteen continued to press on the attack despite the unwieldy-looking cape. Her swordsmanship was not bad... That said, Konoha felt that describing Fourteen's timber attacks in this manner was defiling the way of the sword.

Konoha turned herself and evaded as she chopped with her hand to block the timber attacking from the right. Despite its nimble attack speed, heavy destructive power could be felt from the timber's force of impact. Very likely, it

was able to shatter even rock or concrete.

Fourteen continued to press forward, raising her weapon up high and swinging it down. However, Konoha already anticipated this move and crossed her arms overhead to block the attack. Just as Konoha thought "maybe I can sever it with a scissors-like motion" and poured strength into her arms—

"What a sucky battle. I wanted to praise you in particular. Frankly, that trashy weapon really suits an enemy whose job is to be defeated. It's a great match for you! Hence—Mechanism No.11 tearing type, jagged form: «The Teeth», Curse Calling!"

Fear caused the Rubik's cube to reassemble itself into a thick and massive saw blade. Numerous vicious teeth combined with the mass of steel allowed objects to be sawn apart without needing a saw's usual back and forth motion. Charging in from the side, Fear took a light leap, aimed the saw at Fourteen's block of wood that Konoha had blocked, and swung down vertically.

In that instant, Konoha felt the hammering impact transmitted to her arms—Then her arms suddenly felt lightened.

"Yes, Cow Tits, thank you for serving as a plain old pedestal. It suits your personal style very well."

"Oh come on~ Seriously, you're just sitting back and taking advantage of the situation...! Clearly I could have broken her weapon by myself."

Konoha's view was currently fixed on Fourteen who had silently distanced herself. The block of wood in her hand was virtually wrecked with almost half of it severed.

"So, the one who calls herself Fourteen, are you giving up now?"

"I cannot help but state simply, how is that even possible..."

"Nuu!"

Puffing her chest out in derision, Fear frowned. Konoha also glared sharply at Fourteen.

Fourteen threw the severed piece of wood aside. Next, blue-white light gathered around her arm again as though recreating the earlier scene—An

instant later, she was once again holding another block of wood identical to the previous one.

"Tsk, is she conjuring some magic trick? Another one appeared."

"All I can tell is that it is no ordinary timber. Otherwise, I would have turned it into firewood the instant I touched it."

"Is it cursed wood? Honestly, that name sounds pretty stupid. Also, the way it keeps appearing is quite difficult to accept."

Thinking "whatever," Fear transformed her saw into a long and massive axe.

"Anyway—Since breaking the weapon doesn't end the battle, I'll just have to take care of the person. Cover me!"

"You should be the one covering me instead!"

Saying that, Fear and Konoha both charged at once.

Rushing in front, Fear swung the back of the blade down hard. Naturally, the enemy dodged and the axe tip embedded itself into the ground. Having predicted that Fourteen would evade, Konoha had already circled behind her. Pretending to dodge the thrusting block of wood, Konoha caught the timber barehanded. Using this opportunity to regroup, Fear laughed maliciously behind her enemy.

Maintaining a kneeling posture, she took the axe that was embedded in the ground to slice diagonally towards Fourteen's body. But then a blunt noise was heard. Faster than the steel Fear had drawn out from the ground, a certain solid object had stood in the path of its rampage.

"Two blocks at once?"

Fourteen had extended her left hand behind her, wielding another one of those wooden blocks. Turning her wrist to lower the wooden block's tip, she had blocked Fear's axe.

"Ununu... I'm going to smash that thing very quickly...!"

Fear applied force through both hands, trying to cut through the block of wood directly. But in the next instant, the wood blocking the axe tilted easily. Perhaps surprised by the empty sensation, Fear frowned in puzzlement and

looked up.

The lack of resistance was only natural, because the block of wood was merely embedded in the floor. A fourth block of wood had appeared in Fourteen's left hand. Swinging towards Fear, it struck her viciously in the shoulder. An unusual noise of flesh and bone was heard.

"Ngah...!"

"Fear-san!"

Fourteen followed up on her successful attack. Fear hastily rolled on the ground in an attempt to evade the strike aimed at her head.

"—!"

The block of wood ended up being deflected with clang. This was neither achieved by a torture tool nor a karate chop.

It was a shovel.

"Kaidou-sensei!? What are you doing!?"

Blocking another attack barehanded, Konoha stepped back and looked towards the veranda. She could also see Haruaki and Satsuko over there, nervously yelling "S-Sensei!? Hurry and come back!" So she had run over here on her own?

"I shall help."

Glaring at Fourteen with extremely serious eyes, Kaidou answered curtly.

Despite rubbing her shoulder with a frown, Fear did not seem to be severely injured. Standing up slowly, she muttered to herself:

"...I don't think that's necessary..."

"U-Umm—We are very happy for your kind offer, Kaidou-sensei, but for an ordinary person, this is still... too dangerous."

"Nevertheless, I shall still participate. Indeed, I must do this..."

Her words seemed to be directed towards herself. Konoha did not understand but she knew that Kaidou could not be dissuaded. Indeed, her words seemed to be carving into her own heart the significance of "if I am unable to do this at

this time, there is no meaning in living any further"—

"...You must do this?"

"Of course. This is neither about the shame of a teacher watching students fighting while standing back, nor about lamenting an adult watching children fight while doing nothing—This is purely for my own reasons. I have no obligation to seek your consent."

Konoha sighed as she thought to herself, "I never expected us to be called children by a twenty-something-year-old human." Time was up. Originally observing the newest participant who had joined the battle, Fourteen began to advance, holding a block of wood in each hand. She was dual-wielding?

"Damn it... Cow Tits, let's just take care of her quickly! Let's go!"

"That goes without saying... Oh, seriously, it can't be helped! Kaidou-sensei, please don't overreach!"

"I will handle things as appropriate. So—Action!"

The trio lunged at Fourteen. As Konoha brandished her knife hand, Fear's torture tool growled while one could hear the impacts between the shovel and the timber. Although the strange choice of weapon did not seem to be some kind of cursed tool, the shovel was resilient to an unnatural degree. Was it specially made to order using sturdy materials? Or was it a commercially available product whose strength was enhanced through additional processing? Either way, this kind of shovel was unheard of.

In Konoha's view, Kaidou's movements did not belong to an amateur. Although not to the level displayed by Un Izoey at the cultural festival, Kaidou's combat strength was astounding for an ordinary person. Putting aside the question of where she had learned such skills, she must have actually accumulated a lot experience in this sort of battle.

On the other hand, Fourteen did not seem particularly concerned about the increase in opponents to three. Without saying a word, she simply fought to eliminate the hindrances in her way. Engaging the knife hand and the torture tool, her timber broke many times, but every time, she would instantly conjure a new block of wood, attacking as her cape swayed as though in a dance.

Timing and distances were impossible to estimate. Whenever her weapon broke, Fourteen would conjure another one. Sometimes she would rush directly using a severed and shortened piece of wood. Other times, Fourteen would suddenly let go of her weapon in the midst of battle and conjure another piece of wood, then turning around to aim at other opponents that were approaching her from behind. Perhaps because she was aware of the three-against-one disadvantage, she kept shifting her position as though deliberately taking advantage of her weapons breaking to fight in an ever-changing and unpredictable manner.

"Damn it... You're not that easy to take down! How many pieces of wood are you carrying really!?"

Appearing repeatedly were excessively short cycles of destruction and creation.

The view was dominated by numerous wooden remains. Saw dust and fragmented pieces of wood were scattered all over the ground. Distributed all over the garden, their number had reached the point where one could get tripped if one did not pay attention.

Just when Konoha noticed this situation, Kaidou almost fell over because she stepped on some wooden remains and lost balance.

"...!"

Konoha forcefully squeezed in front of Kaidou and pushed Fourteen back by threatening a collision. Using this opportunity, Kaidou pulled back slightly from Fourteen and steadied her posture. Konoha glared viciously at the enemy and scolded:

"Filling up the garden with all this rubbish... Who do you think is going to clean up this mess?"

"Even as your enemy, I am very sorry about that. After all, I hate noisy and messy environments to begin with—In fact, I really want to sweep this place clean."

"What audacious words. In that case, go and take out a broom to replace the trash you created!"

"...Taking that out is no problem at all."

With a blue-white flash, what appeared next in Fourteen's hand was not a block of wood.

But a broom instead.

"S-She dares to mock me!"

"I get the same feeling—However, this makes me understand one thing. Since she is able to take out other objects, it means that those wooden blocks are not cursed tools or anything like that. Perhaps it might be related to the kaleidoscope tool you entered last time during the cultural festival. For example, a space like a storeroom where objects can be taken out endlessly."

"I get it now... The way I see it, it's most likely candidates are the the veil on her face followed by the cape. Those two things really are too weird."

Fourteen stroked the cloth over her face with her fingertips as she spoke:

"...Since you've seen through it, it can't be helped. Stated simply, the cloak is the right answer. Its name is... The «Warehouse Cloak»."

"Hmph, how direct. In any case, the name doesn't matter at all. On the other hand, why do you keep pulling out these weird objects? Go ahead and grab a sword or an axe. Fight seriously, okay!?"

"...Those kinds of weapons don't fit my personality. Any item taken out from here will increase in sturdiness. Hence, the type of weapon does not matter as long as it satisfies the conditions of easy to use and easy to replenish."

"I see~ So that's why you're so bold as to use blocks or wood or a broom to fight? That's really surprising. Say, Cow Tits—«Breaking Wheel of Francia»!"

Halfway through her sentence, Fear deviously threw the wheel. Fourteen immediately raised her left hand and blocked the wheel. Naturally, she did not block barehanded. Upon closer examination, there were fragments scattered all over—the remains of the brick Fourteen was holding in her hand.

Fourteen adjusted the veil on her face as she muttered in exasperation:

"...What a mess again..."

"Nununu, how much further are you going to toy with us!?"

"Timber, brooms and bricks... All these are goods you can buy at home improvement stores. We can't allow her to produce more trash. We must hurry and take care of her!"

Fear and Konoha closed in on their enemy at the same time. Silently adjusting her breathing, Kaidou raised her shovel.

At this moment, Fourteen conjured another wooden block in her empty hand and murmured:

"...If one were to state simply, that is impossible. Even if I finish the battle without breaking another weapon—In the end, trash will only increase—Your trash-like remains."

Haruaki gritted his teeth as he gazed at the scene. Originally, he was thinking they could handle her but the enemy turned out to be quite troublesome. Although he did not think Fear and Konoha would lose, neither did he think that they could end things immediately.

"Even if I go out and wield Konoha... Damn it, that won't be able to change anything, right?"

"Even without using Kono-san's special technique, the opponent's endless weapons will still continue to break."

"Kuroe, you can go help them, right? Oh yeah, I'm willing to issue another of those 'willing to do anything certificates' to you."

"Hmm—I do want to go out and help. After all, there's this itching impulse."

"Itching impulse?"

Haruaki asked, prompting Kuroe's drowsy-looking eyes to turn towards him for a moment before turning back towards Fourteen.

"I don't know how to describe it... But somehow, I get the feeling that the enemy seems to be taking action while considering something. If she has some sort of special move or battle plan and attacks Sacchi or Haru the instant I leave this spot, it'd be troubling. On the other hand, once this stalemate turns

unfavorable for Kono-san and Ficchi, I will have to go out and help them."

Haruaki did not quite understand but since Kuroe explained it like that, perhaps she really felt something. He could accept it if the enemy only attempted to attack him, but since the target was Satsuko, Haruaki could not allow her to be in danger.

"But even the teacher is trying so hard and taking part in the battle, yet I can't help one little bit... Eh, Satsuko, what's the matter?"

Originally hiding behind Haruaki's back, Satsuko stepped forward lightly. However, her hand was still gripping Haruaki's pajamas tightly with unease. Standing beside Haruaki, she gazed at the garden as she spoke:

"Probably... There's a way you can help."

"Eh?"

"Everyone is trying their hardest... All for someone like Satsuko, right? Satsuko feels very sorry and wonders what she'd do if anyone were to get hurt because of her... So Satsuko wants to help. Perhaps it'll be a waste of effort and more than likely, there won't be any effect. But Satsuko still thinks that it's better than... doing nothing..."

"Uh—What are you... planning?"

Haruaki asked. Hunching her shoulders as usual, Satsuko looked up fearfully at him with an extremely unsettled expression like a young puppy. Then she said something that Haruaki could not quite understand:

"Umm... Could you lend Satsuko something like a pair of scissors?"

Part 5

Questions kept surfacing.

"Huff... Huff..."

Fear glanced at Kaidou sideways. Carrying the shovel, facing forward with great tenacity, her shoulders were heaving up and down intensely. After all, Fear herself was feeling quite exhausted, let alone an ordinary human. In a way, it was only natural for her stamina to be depleted.

(She probably won't listen even if I told her to "retreat"... Especially coming from me.)

Fear thought to herself in self-mockery.

Since Kaidou had refused to listen to Konoha, it was obviously even more impossible for her to heed Fear who was even less acquainted with her. Oh right, if she wanted to keep her distance, if she had no idea how to face Fear, she could have stayed away and not involved herself in this non-human battle.

"Mechanism No.19 gouging type, spiral form: «Human-Perforator»—Curse Calling!"

Without the mental resolve to rid the enemy of an arm or a leg, this battle would only drag on endlessly. Just as this thought crossed Fear's mind, prompting her to bring out the drill with its stench of death, she saw Kaidou's shoulder suddenly tremble.

This was not the first time for her to make that look. Fear had witnessed it many times during the battle earlier already. It happened whenever the screams of turning gears accompanied the manifestation of vicious tools of torture, whenever the cursed Japanese sword sliced through timber outright, also whenever Fourteen continued to summon wooden blocks well into the double-digits.

Indeed, the gradual slowing down of Kaidou's movements was probably not simply due to depletion of stamina. Perhaps she was also getting mentally exhausted. An ordinary person would begin to curse and yell. Cursing and yelling at the disgusting ugliness that was impossible to ignore. This was only natural.

Fear pondered to this point, then an extremely casual feeling surfaced in her mind and she said:

"Say, teacher, could you please stand down?"

In the middle of fighting Fourteen, Konoha threw a sideways glance at her. Fear was not looking at Kaidou. Hence, Kaidou simply responded with her voice:

"...Regretfully, I refuse."

"I don't care about your answer. How should I put this? More bluntly—"

Fear declared "Enough" to herself.

It no longer mattered if she caused Kaidou to further dislike her.

If hatred towards her was going to cause this teacher to get hurt...

Then "the curse known as Fear" would be endangering humans again.

"—*Because you are quite a hindrance.*"

"..."

Kaidou did not speak, a sense of anger rising. Fear quietly waited for her reply.

Fear had already resigned herself to accept whatever response Kaidou might say.

If Kaidou insisted on staying in the battlefield, Fear would make her leave even if it meant knocking her unconscious.

Very soon, Fear heard Kaidou take a deep breath. Like a tautly drawn bowstring, she required slow preparation as though for some sort of explosive action.

Then the instant after Kaidou released her breath sharply as though firing an arrow...

What Fear heard was—

"S-Satsuko surrenders—!"

Fear did not hear the scolding she expected.

Instead, Satsuko had descended from the veranda and was frantically yelling incomprehensibly.

Haruaki accompanied Satsuko into the garden, his limbs tense in anticipation of any unexpected situation. Following beside Satsuko, Kuroe was also rustling her hair on high alert.

At this moment, Fear and Konoha stopped moving. Fourteen also stood still and asked as she fluttered her veil lightly:

"...What do you mean by surrendering?"

"Umm... S-Satsuko means giving up! So she's giving the doll to you!"

Looking past Fear and the others, Satsuko and Fourteen's gazes met. Satsuko took half a step forward and lifted up the object in her hand—a headless doll.

Its body was covered in patches and possessed terrifying claws. This was the strange teddy bear that Satsuko was carrying in her pouch. Naturally, this was not the cursed doll but Satsuko had simply cut off the head using scissors just now.

Haruaki gulped and wondered: "Is this really gonna work?"

Satsuko had proposed this plan based on the dialogue before the battle began.

When Satsuko had asked Fourteen to tell her what the doll looked like, the enemy did not answer. Satsuko had said that she would answer immediately if she had any idea, so at the very least, Fourteen could have described the doll's visual characteristics. For Fourteen, there was nothing to lose in answering that question.

In that case, this meant that instead of refusing to answer, she most likely could not answer. Regarding the doll's appearance, she was not sure herself— That was what Satsuko concluded.

Of course, there was no concrete proof for this. It was just a hunch. Nevertheless—

(Even if we misjudged and the other side sees through our plan, it'd only end up angering her at most. There's nothing to lose... right?)

Feeling that cutting off the head alone was not safe enough, other parts were handled suitably to make the doll look as tattered and filthy as possible. But how much would these cheap efforts help?

"U-Umm... Actually, this is Satsuko's grandma's past possession, so Satsuko didn't want to give it to you and hid it! Since you want this doll so desperately, even going as far as to injure other people, Satsuko will give up on keeping it! If you want the doll, here you go. So, could you please leave...?"

Fourteen's initial response was silence. To Haruaki and his group, the time seemed to stretch on forever. Finally, she—

"...Toss it over."

"O-Okay..."

Satsuko tossed the doll. Although the doll flew over Fear and the others' heads, Fourteen did not catch it directly, perhaps out of wariness. Gazing at the doll that had fallen on the ground for a while, she finally used the end of her broom to pick up the doll.

Was she going to angrily yell "Don't take me for a fool"?

Or would she laugh in mockery and say "You should have given it up earlier to spare yourself the trouble"?

But one could not discern emotion from the face behind the veil. Haruaki felt his heart pounding nonstop as he watched Fourteen's reaction with a mindset akin to praying.

Next, the enemy took the doll and the broom in her hand, inserting them between her cape and the cloth wrapping her body. The two items vanished at

the same time. Haruaki was just about to breathe a sigh of relief when he frantically tensed his nerves again. If their intentions were seen through because he looked too relaxed, the plan would be ruined. Hence, Haruaki decided he must appear to be filled with regret and resentment for losing the deceased grandma's memento they were trying to protect.

Fourteen nodded and turned around silently. Her cape and veil fluttering, she leaped. Traversing over the wall in the garden, she swiftly disappeared. Everyone remained standing in the same spot for a while, but Fourteen did not show any signs of returning.

"Oh man~ ...Th-That was so scary..."

"Y-You did very well. It's okay now."

Haruaki comforted Satsuko who had collapsed and sat on the ground. However, Konoha continued to stare in the direction Fourteen had disappeared as she released her combat stance and said:

"I believe we can't assert that things are completely over... Or am I worrying too much?"

"How so?"

"She could have destroyed the doll on the spot but took it away instead. If she plans to take it back to her superiors for confirmation, it would be bad... Even if no one knows what the doll looks like, others of our kind might be able to determine that it is not a cursed tool. This depends on whether she took it away to destroy at her leisure or to bring back for confirmation."

"Uh... Right, that's possible too."

Just as Haruaki groaned, Fear's silver hair swayed lightly as she returned her torture tool to a toy.

"We won't have an answer no matter how hard we rack our brains, right? Anyway, although we can't relax completely, let's consider this plan a success for now. We'll continue to protect Satsuko for a while. If no further attacks appear, then that means the enemy was deceived. If they find out that we tricked them, they should be attacking angrily again immediately."

"That's quite a reckless theory... But just as you say, it's true that we can't confirm the truth by racking our brains. That's all we can do for now."

"But how should I put this? Settling the matter in this manner makes me feel so helpless. It feels very uncomfortable... But it would be troublesome if the fight dragged on. Who came up with this idea?"

"I-It was Satsuko. Sorry, to think that Satsuko would come up with this crude, lame and weak plan...!"

"Yeah, that woman really is inexplicable. Satsuko said she really couldn't watch you girls getting hurt on her account."

Haruaki added as an explanation. Fear instantly displayed surprise then smiled happily and said:

"R-Really... Well, that kind of insignificant enemy... Gimme another minute or two and I would've given her a sound beating all over! But anyway, I really must thank you!"

Seeing Fear's expression, Satsuko breathed a sigh of relief and smiled:

"Even so, Fear-san, you're so amazing... Was that drill your psychic power? In other words, materializing your overflowing energy into the shape of a drill? It's really cool!"

"Oh, I never thought you'd be that interested in this kind of unknown territory, you... like drills?"

"Yes! Drills symbolize power and strength! Satsuko's two most favorite things are unique occult goods and drills... Satsuko thinks it'd be wonderful if she could collect drill-type occult goods, so she has been searching for that type of thing. Your drill is really excellent but so far, Satsuko only has one drill."

"I'm quite amazed to hear that you have one at all. What do you use it for...?"

"Uh~ Satsuko pares things down with the drill and uses the shape and mass of the shavings for divination. But very unfortunately, Satsuko did not bring it today, so a live performance cannot be done—Anyway, drills are really cool!"

"Wow, if you're gonna chat about drills, I must take part as well. I agree with you, they are very cool indeed—Looks like I should start exploring drill moves."

"What are you two talking about? Speaking of the coolest weapon, that title belongs to the Japanese sword of course. Possessing both power and beauty, the Japanese sword's form is perfect and refined. One could call sword making an art that is guaranteed by tradition—"

Just as the girls all spoke at once...

The sound of sand grinding was suddenly heard as Haruaki and the rest saw Kaidou fall down to her knees.

"Kaidou-sensei!? Are you okay!?"

In actual fact, she had been standing unsteadily for a while now, probably at the limits of her fatigue. Not even able to hold her shovel securely, she was desperately using her hands and knees to support her body from collapsing. Her shoulders heaved strenuously up and down while her breathing was very quick.

Her fists were clenched tightly as though she were suppressing anger. But in the depths of her heart, Kaidou's emotions were probably not that simple. Her eyes, staring straight at the ground, devoid of expression, reflecting a vortex of complicated thoughts. There was no lack of shock and desperate denial of a certain fact, but she was suffering because she could not deny it completely. Her heart remained filled with anger as well as sorrow that almost brought her to tears.

Haruaki's group wanted to rush over to Kaidou's side, but a hand reached out to stop them at this moment.

It was Fear's hand. Next, she nodded and said "Leave it to me" and—

She walked towards Kaidou alone.

At this moment, Fear recalled what Haruaki had said earlier. It would be enough to try approaching her if any opportunity arose and reduce their distance. Fear actually agreed with Haruaki's idea. If she did not approach the other party, there would not be any progress. After all, certain things could not be understood without approaching the other person.

It was the same with Satsuko. Fear was only able to gain a deeper

understanding precisely because she had approached Satsuko with initiative. This made Fear believe that she could grow closer with anyone. Perhaps because they had become closer, Satsuko had desperately tried to assist from the sidelines to save everyone.

Hence—Fear told herself to gather her courage and try approaching Kaidou.

In all senses of the word, whether in physical distance or otherwise.

"..."

Without saying a word, Fear advanced. Perhaps hearing her footsteps, Kaidou looked up.

Although Fear had called her a hindrance just now...

Was it not too late to make up for it?

Fear did not regret saying those words but she hoped that the teacher could understand that she had not meant any ill will.

Fear stopped walking and looked down at Kaidou's expressionless face. She was also looking up at Fear.

Then Fear slowly extended her hand.

"...Are you able to stand, teacher?"

Their eyes met. Kaidou's eyes, filled with complicated thoughts, displayed slight unease.

She did not speak.

A short while later, she raised her hand as though accepting the outstretched hand.

Originally curled into a fist, her fingers opened as though to shake hands.

Then—

There was a "smack."

The crisp sound echoed throughout the moonlit night.

Slapped away, Fear's hand only experienced lingering pain instead of a hand's gentle warmth.



Part 6

Back to her room, Kaidou not only could not sleep but also had no intention of sleeping at all.

Kaidou intended to repeat what she did earlier. Go to bed first and return to the corridor once the young girl fell asleep. Lying in the futon, she waited for the girl beside her to fall asleep, then suddenly—

"...Thank you... very much."

The voice was extremely weak, sounding almost like a wheeze and out of breath.

"I... did not do anything."

No, that was not correct. Hence, Kaidou clenched her fist and said:

"I was unable to accomplish anything."

"Nothing of that sort... You helped Satsuko, right?"

These words made Kaidou feel terrible. Even if she were sincere, it still made Kaidou feel terrible.

Perhaps because it was night.

Or maybe because this girl who was sleeping in the same room had greatly shaken Kaidou's willpower.

By the time she noticed, Kaidou already found herself talking in despair.

"I originally thought I had become somewhat stronger, having undergone training... But the end result was turning in this shameful performance. Furthermore—"

Kaidou recalled the pain running through her hand as well as the situation that had caused that girl the same pain at the time.

Perhaps she was taking out her anger and frustration on Fear? Or was it for some other reason? Even Kaidou herself did not know. Her hand had simply acted out on its own.

Kaidou could not say these words back then. Neither did she have the time to do so. Because the girl had instantly turned around without saying a word, swaying her long silver hair as she ran back to her room.

"Oh no... Please don't be like that~ Umm, Satsuko hopes that you all... could get along well together. Or perhaps, you hate... Fear-san...?"

"...I simply have no idea how to face her."

Kaidou repeated the same words she had spoken hours earlier. Including that sentence as well as everything she had told Yachi Haruaki, everything was true. Although she did not know why, she simply had no idea how to face the girl. But to Kaidou, that was not important. She disregarded and ignored all unimportant reasons, simply wishing to focus on making herself stronger—Nevertheless...

"Honestly speaking, it was truly shameful. I completely failed to become stronger. I am still the same as back then, cowardly to the point... of being unable to protect anything..."

At this moment, Satsuko grabbed Kaidou's hand forcefully. Kaidou widened her eyes in surprise. The girl had reached out from the futon beside her. Inside this dark room, Kaidou could even see her calm smile.

"You want to... become strong, is that it? If that's the case, you're the same... as Satsuko."

For some reason, Kaidou did not feel the urge to shake off Satsuko's hand.

"You too... are the same?"

"Yes. Satsuko really is quite cowardly and useless, unable to do anything well... Even if just a little bit, Satsuko hopes to become stronger, but it hasn't worked. For Satsuko, it's very difficult."

"...It really is."

Very difficult. How on earth should one become stronger? How far does one have to go before one was considered stronger?

If she were to become stronger, would she be able to accomplish things she had failed in the past? Would she be able to hold her head high, puff out her chest and accept this young girl's "thanks"? Would she, as a teacher, be able to openly accept the silver-haired student and others of her kind whom she was avoiding for reasons unknown even to herself?

No idea. She had no idea at all, but she was certain of one thing. She must do something.

Suddenly, she realized Satsuko had stopped talking. Instead, there was the clear sound of...

"Zzz... Zzz..."

The regular breathing of deep sleep could be heard from the futon next to Kaidou. Immediately, Kaidou felt a slight sense of regret, hoping to chat a little longer but at the same time, she was also relieved that she had not further exposed her own weakness.

She originally intended to return to the corridor to guard against a nocturnal assault, but—

"..."

That would require letting go of the hand she was holding.

She would feel bad if she woke up Satsuko.

Then it occurred to her that even if someone attacked during the night in these circumstances, she should still be able to handle it immediately.

Besides—

Looking up at the patterns in the wood on the ceiling, the view from the futon greatly resembled that of the old apartment she used to live in.

Also, the breathing rhythm of the person in deep sleep beside her was the same as what she used to hear.

Despite the feelings of nostalgia, Kaidou knew very well that this was merely ugly and lowly self-deceit.

Hence, she kept staring at the ceiling that looked hazy for some reason.

"...Oh... Is that so?"

Despite clearly knowing it was self-deceit, she was too weak to let go of this hand.

Feeling ashamed of herself, Kaidou smiled.

Chapter 3 - Water and Exposed Skin Everywhere in View. Or Perhaps, / "How to clean the whole stealthily"

Part 1

For the next few days, everyone had their hands full between handling exams and protecting Satsuko. Since they could not be certain if the plan worked in making Fourteen give up, ensuring safety had to come first.

Guessing that the enemy would not attack in crowded places, they decided that Satsuko should be fine when going to school during the daytime. In any case, they accompanied her on the way to and from school and cautioned her not to go anywhere deserted. The only remaining problem was protection during the night. After all, Satsuko could not keep staying over at the Yachi residence, but neither could they go to her home (which was an apartment building), hence their only choice was concealing themselves outside to monitor the place. In the end, the responsibility fell to Fear and her kind who were less prone to sleep deprivation (especially Kuroe who had no exams) as well as Kirika who offered to help due to being aware of the situation. In this manner, the group worked hard and took turns in protecting Satsuko. Although they had asked Haruaki not to push himself too much, naturally, he also tried his best to help out within the bounds of his stamina. Due to a need to prepare for exams and further reduction of sleeping time, it really was quite tough. However, Haruaki could not permit himself to relax while all the girls were hard at work, monitoring for Satsuko's sake.

However, there was also one more person whom Haruaki wished could relax a bit more. Mainly, the extra person who had shown up staring from the first night to monitor Satsuko's home apart from Haruaki's group.

Kaidou. Naturally, she did not arrive at the request of Haruaki's group. The morning after Fourteen's attack, she had thanked them for the night and left. But for her, things probably could not end there.

If Haruaki's entourage were to appear before Kaidou, she would surely say: "Leave it all to me. You should return." Hence, Haruaki's side decided to hide a certain distance away from Kaidou who was leaning openly against a utility pole as though challenging the enemy "Come at me if you are going to strike." Then even more nervous than before, they secretly kept watch.

Hence, from that day onwards, they kept their distance from Kaidou not only at night but also during daytime as well. Perhaps due to sleep deprivation or some other reason, Kaidou was always spacing out, not just during her lessons but also when she came to the class as the exam invigilator, making it impossible for anyone to talk to her. Naturally, Fear did not take any action towards her. It was as though she had forgotten what happened that night.

This scenery filled Haruaki with a sense of loneliness. He was troubled by an inexplicable sense of agitation over "is there any method to resolve this situation?" that he could not dispel from his mind. Precisely because Fear and Satsuko's friendship was deepening as days went by, this anxiety felt especially poignant.

Naturally, Haruaki had no objections to their friendship. Rather, he felt that it was a good thing instead. Ever since that night, Satsuko had grown especially intimate with Fear and would interact proactively. Perhaps the two of them had found some kind of common ground in particular to hit it off.

In any case, while Haruaki was at a loss as to how to improve relations between Kaidou and Fear, the raging storm of the end of term examinations finally subsided. Another few days passed—Since nothing had happened so far, perhaps they could deem their plan a success. Although they remained vigilant, the level of alert gradually diminished.

By the time the first weekend arrived after exams had finished, Haruaki's

group concluded it was probably okay for Satsuko to move around freely. Hence, that weekend became a special occasion to commemorate their dual sense of liberation—from exams and the conclusion of the incident. Under extremely natural conditions, they decided to execute the plan first proposed during the study gathering.

A perfect opportunity. Or rather, it was an opportunity that could not be missed.

Hence, while planning the itinerary for the weekend, Haruaki also decided to put a certain plan into motion. He had no idea if it would work or not. Furthermore, the results would only be visible on that day but in any case, he felt compelled to do it.

Then after some hasty preparations over a neither long nor short period of time...

The Sunday scheduled for the plan finally arrived—

"Ooh— Ooh—Too slow, you guys are too slow!"

"Yeah, but the appointed time hasn't arrived yet. We're the ones who arrived too early."

"That's right. Please do not keep pacing back and forth, Fear-san. It's very unsightly."

"Oh my, waiting like this is part of the fun after all. Say, it's been quite a while since the last trip to the pool."

"I know it's been quite a long time since the last time we all went out to have fun like this. But do you really have to deliberately close up your shop the whole day to take part...?"

"I'd feel so lonely that I'd die if everyone is having fun while I'm the only one working. Haru, do you want me to die? You murderer—I can't help but admit, you must be one of those special serial killers who derive excitement from watching a beautiful pubescent girl like me, dying as result of being ostracized by her friends—"

"Okay okay... But I don't have an entry ticket for a beautiful pubescent girl here, so you'll have to pay for yourself."

Haruaki and his group's location was currently the entrance of the Hitsutou Grand Hotel in the center of Hitsutou City. It was the tallest building in the city with its pentagonal form towering into the clouds. This place was not simply a luxury hotel but also housed their destination today—a water park and leisure facility. Rather than a "relaxed vacation with your family," the building exuded an air that invited "the minority of people who possessed excess time and cash." One could say that it was the kind of venue that Haruaki would never consider in the first place, conscientious as he was regarding family expenses—

"But on further thought, this prize really was quite extravagant. Weren't there hundreds of people in the winning team at the sports festival?"

"I heard that this place's operator is friends with the superintendent."

"That guy's social circles are quite a mystery... But if they're friends, I can understand."

Just as they chatted over these matters, Fear suddenly straightened her posture. She was originally prowling the area in circles like a bear. Waving her hand vigorously, she cried out:

"Oh Kirika! We're over here!"

"Hmm... You guys are really early. I already left home ahead of time."

"Good morning, Class Rep. It's all this girl's fault. Ever since she got up from bed, she's been yelling 'Okay, let's go, we're setting off now,' forcing us to leave the house early."

"R-Really? I see."

As the two met face to face, Kirika's face went red subtly. Intrigued, Haruaki lowered his voice and whispered:

"Umm... You sure you weren't forced into this? If you don't like swimming, I don't actually have to celebrate at this venue."

"W-What are you saying at this point? Umm... I think it should be fine. After all, not everyone who goes to have fun at the pool needs to be in swimwear,

right? I came because I expect to have fun, so don't you worry. U- Understood!?"

"Oh? I don't understand why you're scolding me, but sure, I understand...!"

Kirika scoffed and went "Hmph," turning her back towards Haruaki in a huff. Then she began muttering emphatically while facing the wrong direction:

"...Seriously... I even went that far already, how could I miss this kind of chance? Right, although there's a risk, I'll be fine so long as I'm careful... So..."

"Uh—Class Rep...? What's the matter...?"

"N-Nothing!" Kirika frantically restored her expression then spoke as though trying to change the subject:

"By the way, Kana and Taizou really can't come?"

"Yeah, they can't. They both said their clubs had competitions... Especially Taizou, he was so despaired that he sounded like the world was coming to an end."

Taizou had been inviting everyone to the pool from a while ago... But at this critical moment, he had ended up backing out. Due to the cultural festival and the end of term exams for the past while, this weekend was the final opportunity, but unfortunately for him, he missed it because of a match. When Haruaki explained the situation to Kirika, the result was—

"I never expected Taizou to be this timid... Although I feel sorry for them, it's true that their absence implies less of a risk. If we postpone to the next weekend, fewer of us can join because of supplementary lessons. Further than that, the tickets will expire, so in terms of dates, it can't be helped."

"Hmm, why did I hear an unlucky term? But personally, I don't like going near unlucky things, so I'll pretend I didn't hear that."

Originally chatting and laughing with Kuroe, Konoha tightly grabbed the collar of Fear who had stopped in front of her but still intended to wander around and check out the surroundings.

"What do you mean by unlucky? Please do not indulge in escapism and remind yourself to be more self-aware. Seriously, even though we held a study

gathering... You really aren't one for self-improvement."

"W-What are you talking about? I'll curse you! Listen to me carefully! I did fail Ancient Japanese but compared to the midterms, I improved three marks for Modern Japanese—"

"A mere three marks, what are you boasting about!? It's only because the average went down so your score managed to pass barely, right?"

Protecting Satsuko made everyone even more busy and of course, they ended up spending even less time preparing for the finals than for the midterms. In Haruaki's case, his overall scores were slightly worse than usual (but luckily he did not fail anything), so he was more or less sympathetic to Fear's plight. But Fear was arguing against Konoha whose grades had not dropped very much despite facing the same conditions, which made it difficult for Haruaki to put in a good word in Fear's defense. As for Kirika, her scores were the same as usual, thereby underlining the importance of studying throughout the term.

In the end, Haruaki could not take either side, thus the argument continued to escalate.

"To think you'd fail to understand the importance of three marks. I've always suspected you of cheating, looks like I really should look deeper into it... I keep getting the feeling that you possess another memory organ apart from your brain. Of course, it's one that no ordinary person possesses, so I was thinking it must be an unnatural and twisted biological component that ordinary people cannot imagine..."

"Ah, you...!"

"Wow~ It wobbled just now! Kuroe, look, the creature is awakening, beware!"

"Wah—We're gonna be eaten—"

"Kuroe-san, don't you go joining in this nonsense!"

Just as Haruaki half narrowed his eyes and wondered thought: "Should I break up this argument?"

"Ufufu, you're so noisy here! Hello everyone—"

"Given such unsightly behavior in public, I think it's best that we pretend to be

strangers, Sovereignty."

At this moment, Shiraho and Sovereignty arrived. As expected, Sovereignty did not come in her maid outfit. But rather than Sovereignty, Fear seemed to be more concerned with Shiraho's arrival.

"Shiraho! You've come at the right moment. As my study buddy, you must say something to this girl here—"

"D-Don't go treating me as your buddy so casually. This concerns me not."

Shiraho turned her face away in displeasure. According to Sovereignty's brief report, Shiraho narrowly avoided repeating her legendary achievement of failing all subjects last time. Although it only applied to two or three subjects, she did indeed progress to the point of passing. These results were thanks to her own efforts and the support of her gentle lover, as well as Kirika's earnest instruction of studying techniques.

"...By the way, human, may I say something? I only came here to have fun with Sovereignty. You people only happen to be here by coincidence. Since we are not friends who came together, there is no need for me to show any mercy... Should any of you stare at Sovereignty or me in our swimsuits, I shall instantly scream and have the security guards evict you. I advise you to prepare yourselves. Oh how I really look forward to watching a typical pervert getting taken away while spouting excuses in vain."

"Don't casually call someone a pervert, okay!?"

"Oh dear, so you're actually the pervert...! No matter how others might stare, Satsuko won't make any objections since she owes you... Oh no~ But for further actions, please do it somewhere without people watching please!"

"Anyway, when did you arrive?"

Haruaki had missed Satsuko because of her petite stature. Like a young puppy as usual, Satsuko was trembling nonstop with fear in her eyes.

"J-Just now. Sorry, something happened while Satsuko was on her way. For someone like Satsuko with a hopeless sense of direction, getting lost is only natural... So Satsuko is a bit late. But Satsuko expected this already, so luckily, Satsuko packed a «Hollow Earth Compass» beforehand. Without this compass

for pointing the way towards the entrance to the massive underground cavern in the Antarctic, who knows where Satsuko would have ended up now...!"

"Isn't that no different from a normal compass... N-Never mind. After all, you managed to arrive on time, so there's nothing to be concerned about. It's okay."

"O-Okay, thanks..."

Seeing Satsuko, Fear stopped aggravating Konoha and rushed over.

"Oh~ Satsuko! You've arrived!"

Using her running momentum, Fear high-fived Satsuko with both hands, yelling "Yeah!" in unison. Judging from her smiling face, she was really happy. Of course, Satsuko also smiled and conservatively received Fear's high-five. If Haruaki tried the same thing with Satsuko, she would probably ask fearfully: "Oh no, this mysterious posture! Using both hands, you are planning to toy with Satsuki's body doubly, right...?" Although Haruaki was not particularly envious of their close friendship, somehow he felt rather complicated inside.

"S-Satsuko is here. Satsuko can't believe that you would invite someone like Satsuko who is just an eyesore and not fun at all..."

"Please, didn't we agree already? How could we not invite you? Oh yeah, I should ask just in case. What happened after yesterday?"

Fear stared into Satsuko's face and asked.

"Yes, nothing strange is happening anymore... Like the «Lucky Cthulu Oracle» or the «Crystal Bowling Ball Fortune Telling», both showed good results! Thank you all for taking so much care of Satsuko recently...!"

"Y-Yeah~ I don't quite understand fortune telling... But if nothing happened, it looks like the plan really worked. If that woman found out she was tricked, there's no reason for her not to reappear by now. In any case, if anything happens again, just contact us. I will instantly rush over to your side."

At this moment, Fear brought her face close to Satsuko's ear and chattered away:

"...By the way, umm, will you really be okay?"

"Yeah, because it's a one-piece swimsuit, Satsuko thinks it should be no

problem at all... Sorry for making you worry..."

The two began whispering to each other. Although Haruaki had no what they were talking about, it was only natural for close friends to share a secret or two. He decided not to pay it any particular attention because there were more pressing concerns at hand.

"Anyway, everyone is basically here. Except for one person..."

Fear suddenly threw a slanted glance up towards Haruaki.

"I didn't get her reply... But I think she should be coming."

To be honest, Haruaki felt apologetic towards Satsuko because in a certain sense, he was partially using her. He had sent an invitation through the superintendent. Since that guy pretty much started the whole affair, he naturally agreed readily to help. For example, Haruaki had asked the superintendent to pass along the details of today's celebration as well as Satsuko's participation. Hence, definitely—

"...See."

Soon after, a certain character arrived in her usual tracksuit and carrying a shovel, someone who looked even more out of place in this luxury hotel than Haruaki's group. Like a warrior heading towards the battle arena, she was slowly approaching step by step.

"—Due to the inclusion of many problem children, hence the superintendent requested that I lead this group. You probably heard about this already."

She stopped before Haruaki and spoke these superficial words. As a side note, the teachers on the white team had all received winning prizes for the sports festival—Kaidou was the only one left who had not used hers. But anyway, her explanation was simply the superficial reason the superintendent used to issue orders to her.

Kaidou moved her eyes and met gazes with Satsuko, who smiled demurely and said: "Hello again..." Kaidou used a deliberate-looking poker face and answered: "...Yes, it is wonderful to see you in good health."

As for Fear, her expression disappeared, but immediately—

"Great, everyone is finally here! Then let's go, time is precious!"

"Don't be in such a hurry, it's not like the swimming pool will run away... There are other guests in the hotel, so don't be too noisy."

The group began to advance. Haruaki deliberately slowed his pace and walked beside Kaidou who was in the rear.

"...Thank you for agreeing to come."

This was the first time for them to speak after that night's incident, but she glanced at Haruaki and replied:

"I came on the superintendent's orders. There is no other reason apart from that."

Despite Kaidou's answer, Haruaki still felt grateful to her. After all, things could not begin unless she came.

On that night, he had not asked Kaidou why she swatted Fear's hand away. But after Fear ran back to her room, judging from the way Kaidou stared at her own hand in surprise—Haruaki concluded that she did not actually mean to do that. It was probably involuntary. In that case, there was still a chance to mend their relationship. If she really did not care about Fear, she probably would not have made that face.

But even now, Haruaki still had no idea how to mend their relationship. Since he did not know, Haruaki decided to start from the very beginning. In other words—to attempt bringing them closer together through ordinary means. In turn, Fear and the others could get closer to the teacher in a casual atmosphere. That was all he could come up with.

No matter how much she was at a loss on how to deal with them, perhaps under circumstances when conversation was unavoidable, the awkwardness of not knowing how to face them might gradually diminish or even be eliminated. Of course, this was just a prediction based on subjective optimism. It was also possible for her to become even more at a loss—But recalling what had happened that night, Haruaki decided that it could not get worse.

Indeed, simply stated.

Haruaki had changed his mind and seriously thought: "There's already nothing to be afraid of."

Hence, he arranged for Kaidou to be here. Perhaps a day's worth of time might not change anything but it was still better than doing nothing. After all, their dealings with her were not going to be limited to this day only.

"Well... The superintendent is right, there really are a lot of problem children among these girls. If you'll assist in supervising them, Kaidou-sensei, it'll really help me out a lot. If they do anything strange, feel free to scold them harshly."

Haruaki spoke thus.

"—I shall handle things as appropriate."

Her face still solemn, Kaidou replied.

Part 2

The hotel's entire twentieth floor was a water park zone. The nineteenth floor was also a pool area but since it was a specialized facility for competition events such as swimming races, synchronized swimming and diving, it was apparently provided to universities and amateur clubs for group training and not open to the public.

"Hmm... After all, diving is too scary for me to try, so it doesn't really matter to me. Uh—This floor... So this sign says it's divided into five areas each with unique attractions..."

Haruaki had changed into ordinary swimming trunks. With nothing to do, he turned to look at the map on the wall. Quite some time had passed since he exited the male changing room. Why did girls take so long to change into their swimwear?

The facilities here probably emphasized quality over quantity. There were not a lot of other guests, but it was not empty either. He could hear the sound of people talking and jumping into the water in the pool behind him. These sounds were enough to get Haruaki excited but entering the pool alone would feel especially empty. Furthermore, expecting Fear to get lost in her overexcitement, Haruaki decided to memorize the floor map firmly.

"This place is currently the 'Standard Area'... Uh—Next to that is..."

This floor was apparently divided into five areas that were isosceles triangles. Since the building itself had a pentagonal cross-section, the floor was basically carved into five equal portions by drawing lines from the center to the vertices. Based on the map, the Standard Area was at the very bottom. Then going clockwise, next came the Family Area, the Jungle Area, the Slides Area, and finally, the Coast Area. Every area had its own name. The Standard Area was unique because it included facilities such as the changing rooms, the service

desk and the elevator lobby, hence it had slightly less floor space than the other areas.

Just as Haruaki was looking at the guide panel, wondering what kinds of pools there were...

"I-I-It's water—! It's water everywhere in view!"

"Of course, this is a water park after all. I'd be more troubled if other things were mixed inside."

"If there were swimming pools filled with something like wine, that would be fun."

"...Allow me to retract my previous statement. Oh dear~ That probably would be quite fun too..."

Fear and the girls were chattering away as their voices approached. Thinking "finally they're here," Haruaki sighed and turned around—

Haruaki could not help but feel his heart pounding at the sight before him.

This sight was only natural. He could understand it on an intellectual level but had not expected the shocking sense of reality. The sight of these familiar girls in their swimsuits, how should one put it? Indeed... It made one's heart race.

"W-What is with your gaze... Damn shameless brat! I expected this from you, but is this really the time to be making use of your talent!?"

"Okay, before I refute your accusation, let me ask you something first. Fear, where did you get your hands on a school swimsuit?"

Indeed, Fear was actually wearing a basic school swimsuit. The mundane color of navy blue stood in stark contrast against her shining silver hair and pale white complexion, seeming like an awesome combination, or maybe not.

Back when they first decided to go swimming, Fear had said "Swimsuit? No problem." Due to her confidence, Haruaki originally thought she would ask Kuroe to buy or lend one to her, but little did he expect—

"I asked for this swimsuit as a memento after the cultural festival ended. It was from Kana's senior in the swimming club. Because I helped out at their stall to attract customers, I guess it's also meant as a thank you gift for my efforts."

"Right, I think you mentioned something about helping the swimming club's publicity... But a school swimsuit..."

"I-Is there anything strange? It's still a swimsuit, right? Just in case, I asked Kuroe already and she told me I must wear it! See, we're the school swimsuit duo!"

Fear swiftly grabbed Kuroe by the hand and dragged her out front. Haruaki sighed again. Kuroe was dressed in white school swimsuit. Although he had heard rumors before, Haruaki never expected to this color would actually be available for sale in the market.

Kuroe gazed blankly as usual:

"...This is the Second Player color scheme. Please feel free to enjoy the sight of my partnership with Ficchi."

"No, I don't quite understand what you mean."

Whatever, Haruaki decided to dismiss the sight as "little kids wearing childish swimsuits turns out to be just right."

Just as Haruaki sighed in exasperation, the sight of Konoha turning her body awkwardly caught his eyes. This was the combination of glasses with a bikini, and a perfectly flawless bikini at that. The small, triangular pieces of fabric on top and on the bottom were tied with tiny strings. How should one describe it? —Many parts looked like they were about to burst out.

"U-Umm... Haruaki-kun, you keep staring at me... It makes me... embarrassed. So, the way I'm dressed... Is it very strange...?"

"No—It's not strange, not at all. I-I think, it suits you very well. It looks super."

Just as Haruaki shook his head vigorously and expressed his opinion, Konoha breathed out as though greatly relieved. This resulted in her bosom going as far as to produce "boing" onomatopoeia.



"I-Is that so? Good to know. Although I... 've been worrying if... this might be too daring... But I've never worn it since buying it, thinking I'd try it out in this opportunity. Umm... Haruaki-kun says it looks super... Fufufu... Looks like my efforts have not gone to waste...!"

For some reason, she giggled to herself and leaned back, making a small victory pose. Haruaki had no idea what was going on but seeing her so happy, he felt it was worth it to offer her praise. On the other hand, Fear and Kuroe were chattering away: "That creature finally displays her ultimate form..." "Only we... can stop the first step in Earth's invasion..." That was what their alliance conference sounded like.

Next to emerge from the changing room were Sovereignty and Shiraho. Sovereignty was wearing a cute tube top with hot pants while Shiraho was dressed in a stylish bikini with a halter top and a low-rise design. In fact, she exhibited great potential and frankly speaking, she really looked like a model.

But in her view, how others looked at her lover was apparently more important than they viewed her.

"Sorry to make everyone wait! Okay, let's have as much fun as possible... Shiraho, what's the matter?"

Shiraho swiftly stepped in front of Sovereignty, instantly blocking Haruaki's gaze. Deliberately clicking her tongue disapprovingly, she then—

"...You should go and die."

"Eh, Shiraho, are you in a bad mood? Did I do something wrong again...?"

"No—It's because you're too adorable, I just don't want others to see you. I wonder if a strange epidemic could start spreading, where all humans who stare at you without my permission will die? Starting right now."

Shiraho sulked while Sovereignty hugged her tightly from behind with all smiles. In a certain sense, these two were still the same as usual.

Just as this moment, timid footsteps could be heard. Haruaki turned to see—

"Oh..."

"W-What's wrong? Just hurry up and say whatever you want to say! Stop

staring at me like I'm some sort of rare animal, that's... A-Absolutely ridiculous!"

It was Kirika. Compared to Fear and the rest, there was of course a difference in her level of exposure. On top, she was wearing an oversized t-shirt made of dark and thick fabric that succeeded in completely concealing her attire underneath, whose arm segments were forcefully dragged up to her shoulders. Then on the bottom she was wearing a pareo in a natural manner, thereby perfectly concealing the black leather underneath.

For Kirika, this manner of dress was probably her absolute limit. Haruaki had never seen her expose her arms and legs this much. No, although he had witnessed a number of times what she considered her nude state—But the sight of her thighs flashing in and out of view offered a totally different sense of presences...

"L-Let me repeat myself, absolutely ridiculous! The way I look, it must be quite a killjoy..."

"No, this has nothing to do with being a killjoy... Rather, I should say it's quite a refreshing new look. Yes, it looks great, Class Rep."

Haruaki answered honestly and Kirika ended up blushing suddenly and turning her back towards him. Muttering "absolutely ridiculous... absolutely ridiculous" to herself in embarrassment, she began to fiddle with her pareo meaninglessly.

"Hmm, dressing like that is perfectly safe, Kirika. Besides, there are other people wearing similar stuff, so it's not strange even if you're not in a swimsuit."

Fear commented. Startled, Kirika looked up as though pulling her thoughts back to reality.

"R-Really? Thank you, Fear-kun."

"But... You can't swim in that getup, right? Is it really okay?"

"About that, I never intended to swim in the first place... Besides, I already told Yachi, just being by the pool should be fun enough."

"Oh okay, then it should be fine... So, those two are the slowest again huh..."

Originally looking in all directions, Fear stopped and stared in dumbfounded

amazement. Haruaki followed her gaze and ended up equally dumbfounded.

"Oh sorry for being late..."

Satsuko was wearing a one-piece swimsuit with a skirt design. Although it fit her petite physique, the swimsuit really suited her too well, making her look really like a young child. But to be honest, the striking sight was not Satsuko but the person beside her.

"...My apologies. Due to objections at the service desk, there was a substantial delay. But once I mentioned the superintendent's name, there was no issue."

Haruaki was already used to the shovel issue and did not bother to point it out in particular. However—

Why was her swimsuit more skimpy than anyone else's? Rather than fabric, it would be better described as made of string. Furthermore, it was colored in a passionate shade of bright red and even featured a bold deep-V design that left little to imagination...!

In the edge of his vision, Haruaki found Konoha getting unsteady on her feet and murmuring "Good heavens... Not only did our directions overlap, but I even lost to her...? Then... What's the point for me to dress up so boldly...?" Haruaki tried asking Kaidou. He felt compelled to ask.

"U-Umm, Kaidou-sensei. That swimsuit..."

"This? I did not own a swimsuit and had no idea how to pick one. Hence, I requested Houjyou-sensei to select one for me."

So that person was the culprit...!

The bespectacled and lazy face of the school physician surfaced simultaneously in the minds of Haruaki and the rest. Kaidou stared quizzically and said to them:

"...Is there any problem?"

"Uh—Don't you feel it's quite inappropriate in terms of how revealing it is...?"

Kaidou looked down lightly at herself and—

"—Not at all. A swimsuit is a garment worn to ensure human mobility in water. In fact, this swimsuit has achieved the goal of near weightless fabric. In that sense, there is nothing inappropriate. I certainly do not mind."

"Please be mindful, I beg you— —!"

Part 3

First attempt: unassisted.

"Gurgle gurgle gulp gulp."

Second attempt: swimming board.

"Here I go... Gurgle gurgle gulp gulp."

Third attempt: swim ring.

"W-Wow...! Success, I'm floating... Gurgle gurgle gulp gulp."

Then the fourth attempt—

"L-Look, Haruaki! I can swim now!"

"How can you call that swimming—! You've simply combined yourself with the swim rings! You're covered in swim rings!"

Fear was randomly thrashing her limbs on the water surface. But she was virtually hidden from Haruaki's view apart from her fingertips and the soles of her feet. She had covered her body with swim rings, almost numbering in the double digits. Rather than swimming, it would be more accurate to describe her as burrowed inside a floating cylinder on the water.

"I'm very sorry, dear guest, but please don't borrow too many swim rings at once for one person..."

"S-Sorry about that! Okay, Fear, in any case, come back up first!"

Haruaki bowed desperately again and again to apologize towards the lifeguard who had approached to warn them. Then he pulled Fear out of the pool. Just as Fear returned the free swim rings she had taken out on her own—

"...Muu, it's not like it matters in the first place."

"How could it not matter? Anyway, you're getting way ahead of yourself by

challenging the standard pool on your first attempt... Let me advise you to start with the adjacent Family Area. Shallow pools for children are more suited to you."

"Don't treat me as a child, I'll curse you! In my view, a pool with a more adult feel would be more suited to me!"

Haruaki chased after Fear who was walking off in a huff. But just as she passed by a small rectangular window on the wall, she stopped and went "Hmm?" This window offered a view of the center rather than the exterior of the building. Apparently, the central part surrounded by the five areas was hollowed out. The diving pool on the floor below was visible through the window. This design was probably due to the height requirements of the diving platform.

"Uumuu~ Although that really has an adult feel, I guess it's best not to try it. That's clearly suicide. Who the heck came up with this kind of sport?"

"Indeed that's right. That kind of diving pool would be really be suicidal for you to try. Given your weight, if you should fall into the water, it's most likely impossible for you to float back up again—"

"S-Shut up, I'll curse you! Anyway, let's check out the other pools!"

Watching the empty diving pool was quite boring so Haruaki continued to move on. They were currently in the Standard Area where they started and the main attractions were the 25m and 50m normal swimming pools. Apart from that, there were mini jacuzzi pools that were raised above ground. Haruaki looked over there and found—

"Ah... This feels... very nice... Oh... By the way, is *that*... really okay?"

"Do not worry. It is waterproof."

Satsuko and Kaidou were soaking side by side in the rather bath-like jacuzzi. As for what was waterproof, that needed no further explanation at all. At this moment, Konoha happened to show up.

"Uh— ...May I join in with you two?"

Satsuko smiled and nodded as an answer. But Konoha was waiting for the

other person's response. Hence, arms crossed as she lay immersed in the water, Kaidou opened one eye and said:

"...Fine with me."

"R-Really? Then excuse me... Oh, this surging water feel terrific, doesn't it..."

Haruaki commented to himself that Konoha was also working hard to improve her relations with them. Even with such brief exchanges, accumulated over time, change should result eventually.

Just as he wondered how nice it would be if Fear could follow Konoha's example and looked to the side, Haruaki discovered that Fear had disappeared. As it turned out, she was now standing behind Konoha, her eyes half-narrowed in amazement.

"Good grief... This reeks of the elderly or something."

"Kyah! It's Fear-san? How dare you say something so offensive to one's ears...! Why don't you try a dip here and experience how comfortable it feels!? Come on in and take back what you just said!"

Konoha sat up slightly and turned her head to look back. Her upper body emerging from the jacuzzi tub, she brought her face near Fear. Due to her forward leaning posture, not only her face but also her supple and elastic cleavage was clearly in view. Fear retreated slightly as though intimidated by her imposing presence.

"Hmm..."

"If you've never experienced this comfortable feeling, I forbid you to make any criticisms. Come!"

Konoha leaned forward even more—Naturally, this brought her cleavage even closer to Fear.

"Ooooh..."

Finally, Fear succumbed to the stress brought about by the approaching cleavage—

Her anger erupted.

"Muugah! Such an eyesore, my overflowing irritation compels me to expose your weak point! I see it, you're vulnerable to an uppercut! Watch me!"

"Hyah!?"

Exactly as she described, Fear performed an uppercut. Rising upwards, her arm rushed forward bluntly...

Burrowing into Konoha's cleavage.

"W-Wow... This feeling I've never experienced before, such a mysterious yet irritating sensation..."

"Kyah! F-Fear-san, withdraw your hand now! Please withdraw your hand, immediately!"

"As much as I want to pull it out, I've resigned myself to mutual annihilation. Fufu, with this, you can't move anymore!"

"I can't move! I really can't move, so please, withdraw your hand—!"

"Kukuku, if I do this, you'll feel even more helpless. Up~, down~, up~...!"

"A-Ahh... Please stop... It's going to move out of position—!"

Instead of pulling her arm back all at once to deliver a fatal blow to Konoha, Fear had apparently decided to torment her slowly and thoroughly. Konoha had no choice but to frantically press down on her bikini top to prevent it from getting pulled off.

Meanwhile, Haruaki was trying his hardest to pretend he did not know these people, naturally.

—Without saying a word, she looked up at the building before her.

Basically a regular pentagon in shape, it towered twenty stories high. Geometrically speaking, the design could be described as flawless, a silver exterior without the slightest bit of dirt.

How truly impressive.

The buildings in this country were quite beautiful for the most part. Despite their inorganic nature, she felt goodwill towards them.

Then she looked at the main entrance of the hotel, which was also swept nice and clean without any trash on the ground. Although she was greatly impressed by its condition, there was no way she could enter through the front door.

Hence, she began walking around to find a place to enter.

Meanwhile, the veil over her face fluttered lightly.

Part 4

The part of the Coast Area near the outer edge of the building housed a swimming pool resembling an artificial ocean. Naturally, it produced waves periodically and the walls were painted to depict a tropical sky and ocean. Very thoughtfully, the land area was designed as a beach.

Standing there, Kirika lifted up something in her hand as she narrowed her eyes that were glinting eerily. Then—

"Pay attention now! Considered 'high-class food' since antiquity, both oriental and occidental—Caviar!"

The beach ball was struck high with a "smack" as Fear swiftly reacted to receive it.

"H-High-class rice crackers!" "Matsusaka beefsteak!" "Sea urchin! But I've never had it before!"

"...Let's go for sushi together next time. Shark's fin!" "Oumi beefsteak!" "H-High-class sesame rice crackers! Go and die, Cow Tits!" "Why do you keep picking on me? Fine, objection! Fear-san's choices have been weird since earlier!" "What are you talking about? I can't help it if I don't know high-class types of food very well! If you have any objections, why don't you treat me to something!"...

"How energetic of them..."

Haruaki sat idly on the artificial beach as he watched this beach ball battle. He had participated earlier but had to take a break on the side due to exhaustion. Currently still playing were Fear, Konoha, Sovereignty, Shiraho and Kirika. Kirika had picked a position on the beach nearby, safe from getting wet, and she looked like she was having a lot of fun. Meanwhile, Sovereignty and Fear were waist-deep in the water, splashing noisily as they played with the beach ball.

As for Satsuko and Kuroe, they had been casually going "Do your best, Fear-san!" or "If the ball goes near Kono-san, it instantly multiplies to three, so don't get confused—" to cheer for them, but soon stopped. Thinking "what are they doing now?" Haruaki suddenly looked to the side to find the two of them squatting on the beach like young children, building a pyramid out of sand. They are no longer young children, right?

"Wow... That's wonderful. Sacchi, let's build a classic castle wall, okay?"

"Oh, that's a a great idea—But Satsuko thinks it'll need a lot more sand... Oh!"
Scrape.

Just as Satsuko looked around her, Kaidou had started digging her shovel into the beach without saying a word. This was Haruaki's first time to see the tool being used for its intended purpose. He originally expected the nearby lifeguard to tell her to stop, but Haruaki found the guy glancing at Kaidou with a surrendering expression. Perhaps due to passing on the superintendent's name in the beginning, she was now receiving this kind of VIP treatment—Or perhaps, the staff were simply issued orders of "Danger, don't get involved with her."

"...Use this sand here."

"Th-Thank you very much——! That makes things a lot easier!"

Satsuko exclaimed happily while Kuroe looked up at Kaidou with her habitually blank eyes.

"Thank you. Would you like to join us in building it?"

"No thank you."

Kaidou turned around as she answered. Kuroe bowed her head in disappointment and went "...Really?" However, Kaidou's next words that were uttered after turning away brought a slight smile to Kuroe's face.

"...I shall come over to have a look once you are done. I am actually quite interested in castles."

"Don't worry! I will put my heart and soul into it... And create an exquisite miniature of Azuchi–Momoyama Castle!"

"Yes."

"Eh? You two already reached an agreement, so this means that Satsuko's wish to build a western castle is in the minority...? Looks like Satsuko really is very useless...!"

Haruaki thought "that's not useless" to himself. Considering what happened here and at the jacuzzi earlier, Satsuko had been playing a facilitating role to help Konoha and Kuroe make contact with Kaidou.

In actual fact, Haruaki had asked for Satsuko's help when inviting her along. Since Kaidou-sensei might very well enter her hell guardian mode if no one paid her any attention, Haruaki asked Satsuko to try to engage her as much as possible if she did not mind, then that would be doing him a great favor. This was because Satsuko was the only one who could do this since Haruaki's group still could not manage it. In other words, she was to act as bridge for Fear and the others to come into contact with Kaidou and connect. Haruaki had not expected her to accept so joyfully, but it really was a great help.

Just at this moment, Haruaki heard from the artificial wave pool—

"C-Can I reach it? Oh! ...Th-This feels strange?"

There was a great splash accompanied by Sovereignty's voice. She had apparently submerged while chasing the ball. But there was something wrong with the situation... The ball finally bounced back up but Sovereignty was frantically searching by her feet. With her back facing the beach, she was crossing her arms before her chest for some reason—

"S-Sovereignty, what's the matter with you? Wah, no way...!"

"Hmm? What? Did you get hurt somewhere?"

"Of course not! She must have made some kind of cliched blunder again as usual, this is terrible!"

"A-Ahaha... I don't know where my top has gone—"

Only turning her neck to look back, Sovereignty was smiling politely. On the other hand, Shiraho's face had gone deathly pale as though she had heard news of "an incoming giant asteroid about to cause the end of the world." But an instant later, her eyes became filled with a sense of mission as though she were a lone pilot on a sortie to destroy the incoming asteroid.



"Sovereignty, do not move from your current position no matter what! Don't even turn towards my direction! I will help you find your swimsuit! Glasses girl over there, check if her swimsuit had washed somewhere on the water surface!"

"Understood!"

"You there, check if it has washed ashore!"

"O-Okay, got it."

Unable to enter the water, Kirika nodded in acknowledgement. The only one remaining, Fear was infected with Shiraho's anxiety and asked uneasily: "W-What about me? What should I do?" This prompted Shiraho's gaze to turn even sharper—For some reason, she pointed at Haruaki and said:

"You will be responsible for blinding the depraved human's eyes!"

"Understood!"

"What the heck are you going 'understood' for!?"

Just as Haruaki got up to dodge Fear who was charging at him—

"Oh, found it—!"

Sovereignty rendered all of Shiraho's efforts wasted. Holding up the bikini top she had picked up by her feet, Sovereignty was smiling radiantly. Naturally, she had turned towards Haruaki and the rest of the group, which obviously meant that Haruaki's eyes were treated to the full view of her naked chest—

"Umm—On further thought, I picked this swimsuit so that it wouldn't matter which form I took. So there's nothing to get nervous about!"

Indeed, her entire chest was completely exposed, but it was even flatter than Fear's.

This was the chest belonging to Sovereignty's boy form.

Haruaki breathed a sigh of relief, but—

"...Why do I feel that this makes him even more unforgivable instead? Therefore, please continue and blind that human's eyes."

"Yes, even if considered a boy's, it still feels very shameless. Leave it to me!"

Aren't you girls way too unreasonable?

The back of the building was much messier than out front. For example, there were cardboard boxes waiting to be collected for recycling, weeds growing in the soil amidst thickets, advertising flyers that were blown here by the wind, *etc.*

"What are the cleaning staff doing...? Truly unforgivable. Although there's a broom on hand, time-wise..."

She muttered softly with displeasure.

As she neared the back door, there was a security guard stationed there, of course. The guard eyed her unusual attire and seemed to wonder if some kind of film was being shot. Just as she approached the man who was checking out the surroundings—

"——«Geist»."

Accompanied by a glow, there was a popping sound.

By the time the unusual character passed through the back door, the security guard was nowhere to be found.

He had vanished completely.

Part 5

Exactly as implied by the name, the Slides Area was an extravagant zone where many different water slides were offered. For example, there were steep and precipitous slides, those with extremely complicated turns as well as slides with transparent tubes... For Fear who could not swim normally, these highly varied slides seemed to be especially to her liking. Sliding down the water slides repeatedly, she even invented new ways of having fun.

"Secret technique: screw descent! Wahahahahahaha!"

Spinning sideways rapidly while sliding down, Fear caused a violent splash as she entered the shallows. Her silver hair dripping wet, she instantly jumped up from the water.

"How's that? Did you see it, Haruaki!? Thanks to Satsuko and Kuroe's help, I achieved this labor-intensive move. Ordinary people cannot copy it... Ohoh~ I feel so dizzy now...!"

"Of course you'll be dizzy after spinning so much. Jeez."

Apparently overjoyed with the success of the newly created move, Kuroe and Satsuko were furiously waving their hands over here from their position on the platform where the slide entrances were concentrated. The intense spiral vector was apparently produced by spinning Fear's body sideways just before she slid down. A cooperative technique requiring excessive effort. Although Kaidou was standing behind them to watch, even she seemed to be gazing surprise.

"Hmm—Looks like we really created a horrifying technique. But there's a regrettable flaw in the move just now, right, Sacchi?"

"Yeah... Fear-san! No good~ The move name must be changed to 'Drill Descent' okay~!"

"Oh, that's right. Let's yell that name next time!"

The girls were laughing as they conversed from above and below the slide. Then Kuroe and Satsuko disappeared from view. Perhaps they had moved over to the entrance because they were about to slide down as well. Thinking "how troublesome~", Haruaki shrugged as he walked over to the shallows in the pool to rescue Fear who was still submerged in the water.

"Didn't I say not to play with moves that are too dangerous...? Hey, can you stand?"

"Nuhaha, but it's very fun! That feeling makes it totally worth it... Ooooh, I'm still dizzy."

"Woah!"

Just as Fear grabbed Haruaki's hand and tried to stand up, she spun due to dizziness and ended up falling into the pool again. Although Fear simply giggled nonstop, this caused Haruaki, who was originally holding her hand, to be flung away by the reaction force from the falling motion of Fear's heavy weight.

"Cough cough cough... Hey, Fear!"

Just as Haruaki supported himself with his arms and legs in the shallows and tried to lift his head—

"Oh, Haruaki, watch out."

"Eh? Waaaaaaaah!"

Due to getting flung away by Fear, Haruaki had somehow ended up at the bottom of another water slide. By the time he regained his senses, a certain person had already slid down and happened to crash violently into him. Unexpectedly, this person also happened to be wearing an extremely skimpy swimsuit.

"...Mmm. Sorry."

The situation was really bad. How did he end up getting pushed down by the teacher? If Haruaki kept his head down, he would be forced to drink water. But if he lifted his head too high, he would end up caught between those humongous things. Yet Kaidou did not seem concerned and simply gazed at him

as though saying "...Are you okay?", gazing down at Haruaki from close range. Come on, could you please hurry and move away, okay!?

"Hoohyah...! Wow, that was really scary and fun... How is it, Kaidou-sensei? It's surprisingly fun once you try it~ Hmm, eh?"

Next to slide down was Satsuko. She turned out to be surprisingly athletic and landed in the water with quite a splendid posture. Kaidou muttered as she spoke to the winking Satsuko:

"...Perhaps there is truth in your words, but I do not condone the act of pushing others suddenly."

"Oh~ Sorry... Uh—Umm, Satsuko was thinking if she didn't do that, you probably won't be willing to play the water slides with Satsuko..."

"O-On the other hand, could you please hurry and move out of the way, Kaidou-sensei?"

Haruaki could understand Satsuko's efforts in encouraging the teacher to have fun, but he still wished she could check to see whether there was someone down below first. Thinking that to himself, Haruaki finally freed himself from under the teacher. Then he casually dodged Kuroe who was yelling "Just as you're about to forget, the white angel descends—" and had timed her head-first journey down the slide to collide into him. In the end, Haruaki reached the swimming pool shore safely but it was not necessarily safe in fact. Because he found Kirika there with her legs in the water.

"You're back? I'm sure you must be elated to have such intimate contact with the teacher in the highly revealing swimsuit? I can't stand you, how absolutely ridiculous... A little longer and I would have gone over and strangled you."

"Th-That was an accident, I couldn't help it!"

Kirika went "Hmph" with displeasure, so angry that her legs moved as though she were kicking someone face, splashing the water in the shallows repeatedly. The splashed water produced ripples on the pool surface. Kirika's gaze turned a bit blank as she silently bowed her head and stared at those ripples.

Seeing that kind of gaze from her, Haruaki felt a certain notion rise up in his mind.

"Class Rep... You probably... haven't visited... this kind of place for quite a long time, right?"

"Hmm? Well, yeah. But let me state for the record, I do bathe every day. The act of soaking in water itself means nothing special to me."

Haruaki thought "that's probably not the same" to himself. Bathing should feel completely different from swimming with everyone or getting all wet while playing noisily with everyone.

Haruaki felt the notion stirring in his mind again. An idea he could not suppress. Hence, he surveyed his surroundings. Unsure how to read his actions, Kirika said:

"See, Fear climbed up again. Why don't you try the water slide again?"

"...You're right. In fact, I'm thinking of trying the special technique that Fear and the others were playing around with. Class Rep, if you're free right now, could you assist me?"

"I'm waiting here for Konoha and the others to return from the washroom... How troubling, I never thought you'd be even more childish than imagined. That said, I can understand why you're having so much fun playing."

Kirika reluctantly stood up. Haruaki went with her up the stairs to the entrance to the slides. Although he felt nervous about his greatest mission of the day, now that they were there, he could only go ahead with the operation.

"Then what should I do? Should I spin you like Fear-kun just now—"

"Class Rep, I'm sorry!"

"What!?"

Haruaki grabbed Kirika's shoulders from behind and crashed into her directly, pushing Kirika into one of the water slides. Due to her intense struggling reflexively, Haruaki ended up rushing into the slide together with her.

"H-Hey, Yachi! What are you... doing here... Wah!"

"It's dangerous if you move recklessly, Class Rep! Woah, this is so fast!"

At this moment, Haruaki recalled what Satsuko had said. Indeed, all it took

was a single try and one would find it surprisingly fun. Accelerating from their combined weight, the two of them were also drenched by the flowing water in the slide. While trying his best not to think about Kirika's body that was sandwiched between his legs, Haruaki entrusted his entire body to gravity. A few seconds later—

Splash!

"Huff, ah... I hate you... Yachi! You, you, why...!?"

Kirika was blushing bright red, a sense of world-ending despair flashing in and out of her eyes while she crouched down in the pool, covering her body with her arms. Her soaking wet t-shirt clung tightly to her body while the pareo was out of position, causing the black object beneath to become vaguely visible.

"Relax, I should say that you're nowhere as conspicuous as you think. Besides, you're also wearing a t-shirt. People can't see it unless they stare long and hard at you. And even if they saw it, people would just think it's a black swimsuit."

"H-How could that be..."

"Also, there are few guests right now. I've also been observing from just now. There are absolutely no other students from our school. Also, given how luxurious these facilities are, even if the lifeguards saw it, they'll definitely keep it a secret."

Kirika stared intently at Haruaki but he smiled as though bouncing her gaze back and said:

"Besides, if anyone dares to stare long and hard at you, Class Rep, I'll head over to give him a good piece of my mind and ask if he's got a problem with that. I'll definitely do that."



"Oh..."

Kirika's eyes wavered. Then her shoulders began to shake—

"Haha... Ahaha..."

Slowly, slowly, she loosened her arms that were wrapped around her body.

Then with a splash, she laid herself backwards onto the shallows of the swimming pool, floating with her arms and legs outstretched on the water surface.

Very likely, many years had passed since she last did this.

After a while—

"You're right, perhaps I'm worrying too much. Maybe I'm too self-conscious..."

"That's right, for some things, the more you try to hide, the more attention you end up attracting, right? If this were a crowded place, I wouldn't force you. But there's no one here and you're wearing a t-shirt with a pareo, so there's absolutely no problem."

"To be able to make me feel that it's alright—That's truly unbelievable. Only now can I feel that it's no big deal. If it's someone special, someone whose focused attention would be enough, tells me there's no need to be concerned anymore... Indeed, perhaps there isn't... anything that needs to be concerned about..."

Haruaki did not quite understand what Kirika was talking about as she floated in the shallows of the pool.

"Ahhh... I haven't done this for so long. It feels so comfortable, extremely comfortable..."

Her expression looked very liberated.

Also, she looked extremely happy.

Despite taking forceful measures, Haruaki concluded that it was fortunate that he had decided to do this. After all, this was a rare occasion with everyone visiting the pool to have fun. It would be quite a shame if she could not enjoy

herself together with everyone, would it not?

"Ohoh, Kirika has entered the fray as well!? Hmm~ It's completely fine. However, I never expected you to use a two-person combination technique... Nothing less expected of you! I won't lose! Haruaki, I wanna use that move too. Let's combine! Come on over!"

"Hey, hold on a second! I just returned from the washroom and suddenly saw something I could not watch any further! Haruaki-kun, please play the water slide together with me next! Uh—Umm, it's my first time on a water slide today, so I'm scared and I'd like to have someone accompanying me. So please, you must combine with me!"

Fear was looking down from the entrance area to the slides while Konoha had just returned to the pool side. They both proposed at the same time and started glaring at each other.

"U-Umm... How about this? Why don't you two play the water slide with each other..."

For some reason Haruaki could not understand, this resulted in Fear and Konoha returning ice-cold glares at him.

Neither could he understand why Kirika was laughing to herself on the side, causing tiny ripples as her shoulders shook.

"Wel... come..."

"E-Excuse me..?"

She jumped over the counter and reached for the necks of the two female receptionists. This was followed by two bright flashes.

Then the only one remaining was her who was definitely not a customer.

Her cape fluttering, she went over the counter and invaded the staff room, doing the same thing to the handful of people inside. In preparation for what was coming up next, she must get rid of all irrelevant humans on this floor at least. Exiting the staff room, she next visited the male changing room, followed by the female changing room. Apart from a bit of commotion in the female

changing room, she finished the job smoothly without issue.

With that, only the inside remained. Her first priority was the same as before: discreetly, thoroughly, but completely silently—Eliminate everyone in the way. Speaking of how this action should be named, obviously—

"...Spring cleaning. Okay, time to clean up. Then comes settling things..."

Looking a little pleased, she murmured to herself—

Fourteen Coonsberry headed off to the pool area for the sake of spring cleaning.

Then thinking "once this is done, I'll be heading to the imminent battlefield" to herself, she entered.

Part 6

"Huha— ...We've played the water slide quite a number of times, but there are still areas we haven't tried out. Haruaki, should we check out the Jungle Area next?"

"You're really energetic. By the way, isn't it weird? Don't you find that the people seem to be decreasing in number?"

"Really? To me, it feels like the numbers haven't changed."

Haruaki's group was still at the Slides Area but there was not a single guest in the surroundings. The only person remaining was a lifeguard who was sighing in a daze, exhausted from repeatedly warning Fear and the others for their dangerous behavior.

"It's not near closing time either. But then again, since the price is quite high, perhaps they select customers through the principle of quality over quantity... That said, since we're using complimentary tickets, we didn't spend any money."

"Hmm, speaking of money, that reminds me. Shiraho and Sovereignty still haven't returned?"

"Come to think of it..." Haruaki was wondering the same. Shiraho and Sovereignty had mentioned they were buying drinks so the rest of the group had asked them to help get theirs as well. Even if the two girls had gone off to the beach store in the Coast Area or the shop visible upon arrival in the Standard Area... No matter which area they visited to find a shop, they should not be taking this long. Especially since the number of customers were so few.

"After all, Sovereignty-kun is with her. Maybe she fell over and scattered their money, splattered the drinks all over the floor, or something like that. She could have made all sorts of blunders."

"Sigh... That sounds a bit worrying, who knows if they're fine or not?"

Kirika and Satsuko expressed their concerns. Hearing them, Kaidou said: "...If you feel worried, let me go and investigate."

"Oh, there's no need, Kaidou-sensei. Since we're about to visit the Jungle Area anyway, let's make a detour to check out the shops."

Sakuramairi Shiraho was exploding with rage. This was totally outrageous.

"...How could there be no one here!? Do they actually intend to run a business...?"

Shiraho was tapping her fingertips on the counter in the empty shop, muttering impatiently. She had already waited for ten minutes yet no one had come to serve her. Even when she surveyed her surroundings to find a person to complain, for some reason, there was not even a single lifeguard in this Standard Area. Neither were there any guests. It was completely deserted.

"So weird. Maybe we didn't notice but the place actually closed up already?"

"How could that be possible? The sun still hasn't even gone down yet."

"Uh—Or perhaps there's a fire and everyone evacuated?"

"But we never heard any fire alarms or sirens from fire trucks."

As her lover looked back and went "Oh right~" and smiled as usual, scratching her head, Shiraho chuckled and smiled: "I'm already tired of waiting. Why don't we just give up and return? Then we'll cordially tell them 'You can drink the pool water to quench your thirst.' Alternatively, there should be people at the service desk so we could go there directly in our swimwear and complain. Which of the two choices do you prefer?"

"Ahahaha. Well, to me..."

Just as Sovereignty was about to speak...

A shadow suddenly appeared behind her, causing Shiraho to stare in wide-eyed surprise.

"Sove...!"

"Eh?"

Before Sovereignty could look back, the dark figure—a veil over her face with fluttering clothing and a cape—had already reached towards her neck, producing blue-white light. Perhaps producing effects like a stun gun, it made Sovereignty sway on her feet. But just before she almost fell, she steadied herself with much difficulty.

"Gah... Shiraho, hurry and escape...!"

"To think you withstood it. Is it because you're not human? Nevertheless—You're still very weak."

The shadow reached out with her other arm, releasing light again with both hands clamping Sovereignty's neck. The mysterious flash finally caused Sovereignty to lose consciousness. Next, the shadow stuffed Sovereignty's body under her clothing— The unconscious Sovereignty, unbelievably... She had vanished completely.

"What...!?"

Anger, worry, fear, all sorts of emotions surged inside Shiraho, but her body still moved obediently. In an act very true to her arrogant style, Shiraho forcibly picked up the drink dispensing machine on the shop's counter and intended to throw it towards the enemy before her eyes. However— "Of course... You're also very weak."

The last thing Shiraho saw before losing consciousness was the spark of light bouncing off her neck.

Then Haruaki's group witnessed the sight.

They saw Shiraho's body disappearing under the figure's clothing as though being sucked away.

"What...!?"

"It's you!"

The instant they passed through the glass door to move between areas, they witnessed an unbelievable sight, but no one here doubted what they saw.

Haruaki's group prepared for battle and glared at the enemy's back while she stood before the shop. However, there was one person not looking at her—namely, Satsuko who was moaning weakly, her body curled up.

At this moment, Fourteen Coonsberry slowly looked back—

Receiving Haruaki and his group's gaze with the veil on her face, she spoke leisurely:

"My goal remains unchanged. Stated simply... Hand over the 'real thing' to me."

Chapter 4 - Mayhem Permitted. Additionally, / "Because we are friends"

Part 1

Konoha readied her hand in a karate chop. Kaidou took deep breaths as she raised her shovel with trembling hands. Kuroe moved her dripping wet hair while Kirika reached towards the pareo at her waist. As for Fear—

"...Tsk!"

After touching her school swimsuit, Fear clicked her tongue angrily. Although her attire had made it impossible for her to carry the Rubik's cube, she was not scared at all.

"Shiraho—What did you do to her!? And Sovereignty as well!"

"If one had to state simply, they were eliminated. Cleaned up incidentally."

"You dare say... incidentally...?"

"Let me clarify first, calling for help is futile. Currently on this floor, apart from you guys, there are virtually no other humans—All of them are under my control right now."

Haruaki gritted his teeth in anger. So this woman was responsible for the sudden lack of people? They had all disappeared in the same way as the unconscious Shiraho just now.

"What on earth did you do? Where did everyone go? Are they still safe!?"

Filled with unease, Haruaki yelled loudly. Although the enemy had no

obligation to answer, luckily, Fourteen replied readily.

"They are all alive, akin to sleeping—Currently speaking."

"You said 'currently speaking,' didn't you? So that means if we beat you up, you'll release them all?"

Konoha's words were filled with murderous intent.

"...Yes, as long as I will it."

"I see. In that case, we just need to hurt you until you relent... Do you intend to use them as hostages? Truly despicable."

"Before I find out the location of the 'real thing,' I will not allow any interfering elements to disrupt my plans. I would be troubled if you guys fled."

Hearing that word, Satsuko was so scared her entire body trembled. Fear took a look at her then smiled in mockery.

"Hmph, I originally thought you were stupid enough to be deceived completely... How did you find out?"

Fourteen paused for a moment then replied:

"...I saw it on the streets."

Haruaki and the others instantly pondered the meaning of her words and came to a disheartening realization. Satsuko had mentioned that her fake headless doll was made from a teddy bear that came from a claw vending machine. Where exactly did Fourteen witness the mountain of dolls piled up inside a machine? In any case, "unfortunate" was all one could conclude.

"No, umm, you're wrong! Satsuko already said many times, she really did not take the doll—!"

Satsuko squeezed her voice out but Fourteen mercilessly shook her head and said:

"I don't believe you. Since you used a fake doll to trick me, that implies that you possess the 'real thing'... Hence, by any means necessary, I shall question you for its location."

"She already said she didn't take it. Don't you understand human language?"

But just curious, what means do you intend to use?"

"For example, torture that would make her wish she were an inanimate object with no sense of pain or humiliation that would make her regret being born female. In addition, there is—Ah yes."

Fourteen slightly raised her arms as she replied to Kuroe. A glow appeared but different from the momentary flashes of light witnessed earlier. Instead, this was a bigger, persistent phenomenon of light—similar to blue-white ghostlights. There were not one but three. The lights left vague afterimages, hovering as they flew around her arms irregularly past one another.

Then Fourteen continued speaking with mild hostility:

"—There's also the option of questioning her before her friends' corpses. Surely she will reply obediently then."

"You are free to try, but you'll surely regret it!"

"I don't know what grounds you have to dare say that. If you believe you have tested out my powers through the battle last time, you are sorely mistaken. Because clearly I had not exerted myself at all."

Instantly—

The irregularly flying ghostlights suddenly changed directions. The ghostlights rapidly spun around her forward extended arm as though tracing out a circle. Sometimes they moved in a straight line towards the opposite edge of the circle; sometimes they changed directions with acute angles; sometimes they traced out smaller circles inside the outer circle. Visible to Haruaki's group was a lingering afterimage of light that resembled a magic circle composed of complicated patterns—

"...Mayhem permitted—«Geist»!"

"What...?"

In the center of the glowing circle, something seemed to be sliding out of her outstretched arm but it was not one of those wooden blocks seen the night before exams. It was very similar but not the same. A certain object several times bigger than wooden blocks. As much as it looked like a rectangular block,

no matter how similar the timber, if it was several dozen times thicker, it could no longer be called a wooden block. For an analogy, it would be a strange phenomenon akin to the rectangular support pillar of a torii appearing horizontally out of thin air.

Instantly, Konoha's face changed drastically in alarm.

"That kind of object can't possibly be moved by hand. If that's the case—It's going to be shot out! Everyone hurry and dodge!"

Konoha's prediction was completely accurate. Haruaki's group frantically jumped away from their position. Fourteen steadied her arm as though locking onto a target—Accompanied by an acute exhalation, the long and massive wooden beam was shot out at high speed from the air. Immediately, there was a deep and violent sound of concrete breaking. The impact went as far as to cause the floor to shake intensely.

"...What?"

The only surprise was that Fourteen's target was not Haruaki's group but far off to the side. Namely, she had targeted the entrance to this pool area.

Shooting the giant object for a direct hit above the entrance, she had caused the concrete at that location to collapse completely. Just as gray powder scattered everywhere, everyone could see the collapsed concrete wall and the giant wooden beam completely blocking the automatic door that led to the service desk and the changing rooms.

"...Personally, I am quite unwilling to make a mess of this place, but it would be troublesome if you people escaped."

"S-Stop screwing around! Now there's no way for me to get it...!"

Fear clenched her fist and yelled. In order for Fear to use her power—to start the cube emulation—she needed that Rubik's cube as a medium. The first thing she thought of just now was probably going to the changing room to retrieve it. But given the situation, it was no longer possible. Gathering everyone's strength, they should be able to clear away the concrete debris at least, but Fourteen was definitely not going to give them the chance to do so. If the present giant wooden beam was the same as those wooden blocks and taken

out from that so-called «Warehouse Cloak», it was not going to disappear after a time limit and go back to empty space. Haruaki knew because after the exams, they had spent a lot of effort cleaning out the wooden blocks from the garden.

"Getting angry is your freedom. But please pay attention to what I will be taking out next."

Fourteen declared and the ghostlights rapidly traced out afterimages again. This time, the light was reflected in the glowing circle and gave rise to countless beams of bright light.

"Tsk! Mode: «Cushioning Munemori»!"

In front of everyone, Kuroe's hair rushed forward and spread out explosively. Successfully forming a soft shield, the hair curled up the projectiles in wavy curves and threw them to the floor—transparent shards of glass in varying sizes.

"Woah, that was close... Kuroe, thanks for your help!"

"Hmm—The enemy is throwing projectiles like mad. She didn't use them before... Was she holding back?"

"Maybe she wanted to save it up as an ultimate move and was reluctant to use it? In any case, I will close in and defeat her."

Kuroe and Konoha conversed as they advanced.

"H-Hey? What are you two planning?"

"Anyway, the enemy's target is still Satsuko so she should escape from here first."

"Indeed. Where's the emergency exit? You guys should look for it while the two of us pin her down."

"...Then I'll assist in pinning her down. I have the «Tragic Black River»."

Kirika lifted her pareo lightly. The black leather was being used as a belt in its proper position, probably for securing the pareo that was wrapped around her waist.

"No... Ueno-san, please go along to protect Satsuko-san. After all, we can't be sure if the enemy has any accomplices. Also, Haruaki-kun, Fear-san and Kaidou-sensei should protect her together. Leave it to us two to handle things here!"

Haruaki looked at the other two people's conditions.

Fear was clenching her fists, unarmed. Her eyes were very simple to read for they were filled with dissatisfaction at being unable to fight despite wanting to. She was suffering because she not only wanted to protect Satsuko but was also confronted with her inability to rescue Shiraho and Sovereignty who were being used as hostages. Haruaki was certain of his assessment.

Kaidou was also gripping her shovel tightly. Her eyes were filled with complex emotions. This had started ever since Fourteen's reappearance. She looked like she was hesitating over something, angry at something, yet afraid of something—Staring at Fourteen, she simply breathed in and out.

Instantly, Haruaki made his decision. Presently, there was no choice but to leave the situation for Konoha and Kuroe to handle. Satsuko's cowering with her shoulders hunched and trembling further convinced him. No matter what, it was imperative to help her escape first.

"Argh, damn it... Don't force yourselves too much! Once Satsuko succeeds in escaping, I will return!"

"Who knows? We might even finish the battle before then!"

"Woah, it's coming again!"

Kuroe spread her hair and blocked the blades of glass again. Konoha went under her hair and started dashing towards Fourteen. Haruaki took one final look at them then he turned around:

"Let's go, Fear!"

"D-Damn it...! I actually could fight her barehanded... But it can't be helped!"

"Ah ooooooh, everyone, this is all Satsuko's fault, so sorry..."

"Before you speak, remember to start running, Satsuko-kun!"

The teacher still remained at the scene. Haruaki turned his head back and yelled:

"Kaidou-sensei... Let's go!"

Kaidou shut her eyes lightly—for roughly a few seconds.

When she opened her eyes again, she also started running.

But this action was not for fleeing Fourteen's attacks but to chase after Satsuko.

That seemed to be what she was telling herself as she locked her eyes, filled with complicated thoughts, on the back of the petite girl before her.

Part 2

Five blocks of wood simultaneously appeared amidst the crisscrossing ghostlights and were shot out successively at high speed as though by a Gatling gun.

Konoha and Kuroe ran on the pool side as they dodged, pursued closely by the sound of hard concrete getting smashed behind them and noisy splashing of water.

"Who will actually pay for this damage..."

"How would I know!? In any case, it won't be us!"

"...Simply stated, I have no intention of paying either."

Fourteen spoke candidly as she conjured bricks to shoot as ammunition. Konoha and Kuroe jumped apart. The bricks exploded in the space between them and even created a large hole on the pool side.

"Ah, seriously... We can't go on the offensive unless we get close, but she loves shooting bricks...!"

After entrusting defense to Kuroe, Konoha had succeeded a number of times in skillfully evading the incoming projectiles by slipping underneath them. But every time, Fourteen would retreat and create distance between them.

"But at least, this can stall for time."

Kuroe took a look at the entrance behind them, leading to the next zone—the Coast Area.

"True, but the way she keeps firing consecutively, even our lives are at risk here. Furthermore, I'm worried about Shiraho-san and Sovereignty-san's safety."

"Yeah. Even if they're inside that cape, it would be troubling if the enemy tells

us that they are weakening as time goes on. A quick conclusion would be best—Kono-san!"

A broom was flying handle-first towards them like a spear. Konoha turned her body and just as the broom was about to strike her shoulder, she chopped with her hand. Although it caused numbness in her hand, she managed to deflect its trajectory. As she heard the sound of the broom penetrating into the wall behind her, she spoke:

"To think I would be unable to slice through a mere broom, what a blow to my self-esteem... Let us switch to offense now. Kuroe-san, you'll first attack her while I take advantage of the distraction to charge her. As for evasive maneuvers, we'll just have to manage independently."

"Understood. Well then—«Penetrator Yoshimasa»!"

"...Hmm!"

Kuroe's bundles of hair extended forward like spears while Konoha sprinted in parallel with a forward-bending posture. Groaning, Fourteen attempted to retreat but Kuroe's hair did not stop extending, continuing to lengthen and hinder the enemy who finally stopped. Kuroe's hair grabbed the wooden blocks summoned with the glowing ghostlights and bounced them away with the tips of her hair. Just as the floor was being destroyed by the fraction of Kuroe's hair that had missed, Konoha had already closed in on the target.

Chopping with her hand and engaging a wooden block, she did not give Fourteen any time to summon a second block. Just as Konoha thought "victory" and extended her sharp blade of a hand, she saw Fourteen reach out to counterattack with a clearly unarmed hand. No—

Her hand was surrounded by ghostlights.

(!)

Konoha was reminded of the scene when they first spotted Fourteen in the water park. Back then, there was lingering glow on Shiraho's neck for an instant. Hence, Konoha immediately understood it was caused by the ghostlights. Did it produce an effect like a stun gun? As much as Konoha believed she could not be easily incapacitated by such a move, she could not be certain of preventing

openings from forming. At such distances, instantaneous openings could be fatal. This was quite a crisis—

Perhaps Konoha should not have strained herself to jump back. The result was even worse. Due to being by the pool, the floor was wet of course. Thus Konoha slipped. Losing balance, she fell on one knee. Just as she felt a chill down her spine—

"Mode: «Chaotic Tadamori»!"

Suddenly, Konoha felt a sense of weightlessness. It turned out that Kuroe had wrapped her hair around Konoha and forcibly pulled her away to another part of the pool side. Perhaps intending to regroup, Kuroe moved to the spot furthest from Fourteen—the other end of the pool, fifty meters away. At such a distance, they could easily dodge even if Fourteen fired projectiles to attack. If Fourteen tried to approach, they could circle around the other side of the pool side.

"Th-Thank you, Kuroe-san...!"

"Not at all, not at all. If you want to thank me, let me continue to savor your body, Kono-san. Wow~~, I really don't know how to describe this amazingly bouncy feeling... So sexy!"

"How could you still have time to joke around!? Put me down right now!"

Despite having pulled Konoha back already, the hair remained wrapped around her body until now. Back on her feet, Konoha stood by the pool side and said:

"Well~ then, although I made a small blunder, what should we do next... Hmm, what?"

"...«Geist»..."

There was a series of powerful splashes. The enemy kept firing metal rods—laundry poles roughly two meters long—into the 50m pool before them. The laundry poles were embedded slanted into the bottom of the pool. Using the tips of the laundry poles protruding out of the water as stepping stones, she approached. In a flowing cycle, she kept repeating the motions of jumping, firing and landing.

"This is no good. She'll close in soon if this continues. This spot is also too narrow and not good for dodging. We'd better hurry and move."

"Even if you want us to move..."

The first option was the entrance behind them, leading to the next area. However, the two girls could not retreat so easily since their mission was pinning down the enemy.

"If the adjacent Coast Area has an emergency exit, I'm sure Haru and the others would have escaped already. If it doesn't have one, I'm guessing they should have moved to the next area. Also, I've come up with a plan, so let's try it."

"A plan huh... Understood."

With no time to hesitate, the two girls swiftly opened the glass door behind them and moved over to the next area. Haruaki's group could not be seen there. As Konoha and Kuroe moved over the rustling sand and reached roughly the midpoint of the beach—

"Okay, let's see how it goes. If it works, perhaps it could cause symptoms such as fainting, sluggishness or blindness. Then you can take the opportunity to finish her off, Kono-san."

Kuroe's hair rustled and moved as she said "this is a new move, I'd better decide on a name..." and prepared for battle. Konoha realized Kuroe's intent from the motion of her hair and silently readied her knife hand in preparation for combat.

Several seconds later—

"...I wish you wouldn't run away. I already used precious laundry poles already."

Saying that, Fourteen appeared. Just as she walked a few steps and stepped into the beach—

"Uh... Okay, I've decided! Mode: «Mongolian Death Worm Yoshikado»!"

Lurking in the sand, Kuroe's hair rose up at once. The entangling bundles of hair bulged up as though scooping up the sand, almost like man-eating worms

of the desert. Naturally, the sacrifice was the unsuspecting enemy who had stepped into this trap. The hair carried a large amount of sand and dumped it over Fourteen's head all at once. As the cloud of sand swirled around, she was engulfed.

"Gotcha...!"

Konoha rushed over while confirming the situation. In concentrated amounts, a substance like sand would turn out to be unexpectedly heavy. In that case, the enemy should be immobilized.

However—

As the lingering cloud of sand settled slightly, what entered Konoha's view was—

"—Sand? I don't like sand, it's too hard to sweep."

"What...!?"

Unbelievably, Fourteen was currently holding an umbrella over her head casually. Who could have thought she would have prepared even something like that? But rather, speaking of which, a mere umbrella should not be able to block that amount of sand—

"I think I mentioned before, the objects taken out will increase in sturdiness."

Perhaps noticing the surprise in Konoha and Kuroe's eyes, Fourteen muttered an explanation. Konoha's momentary pause would prove to be a fatal mistake.

"Okay... Mayhem permitted—«Geist»!"

The ghostlights traced out patterns in midair. Slowly appearing from there was a giant wooden beam like earlier. Naturally, they could not allow themselves to be struck by that kind of thing. Konoha and Kuroe attempted evasive maneuvers, but the wooden beam's target was the same as before.

Aiming slightly upwards, the wooden beam was shot towards a location slightly further behind Konoha and Kuroe—thereby completely destroying the entrance leading towards the Slides Area. Amidst the rumbling noise, Konoha wondered. Why aim there? Isn't she chasing after Satsuko-san who is escaping behind us...?

But as soon as she saw Fourteen turn around towards the Standard Area, Konoha suddenly realized that things were different from what she imagined. Kuroe also seemed to agree.

"Drats, Kono-san... She wants to circle around the opposite direction!"

This floor of the hotel was divided into five areas arranged in a circle. Naturally, going counterclockwise would eventually reach the location of Haruaki's group—

"Gah... She can't be allowed to succeed!"

Clenching her fist tight, Konoha pursued Fourteen with Kuroe as fast as they could.

Part 3

Meanwhile searching for an emergency exit, even Haruaki's group ran into many problems. First of all, while entering the Coast Area from the Standard Area, Satsuko tripped in the sand and twisted her ankle. Without saying a word, Kaidou carried Satsuko on her back but this still slowed them down to some extent.

In the next zone, the Slides Area, there was a lifeguard whom Fourteen had not "eliminated" yet. Despite being frightened by the noise from the collapse of the entrance to the pool area, he could only look around frantically because he could not abandon his post. Since it would only add to their troubles if he witnessed something that he was not supposed to see, Kirika used the «Tragic Black River» to choke him from behind and render him unconscious. Then the matter was settled without issue by hiding him behind the water slides. In actual fact, Haruaki did not feel that this was without issue, but he definitely could not come up with a better solution.

Next, they reached the Jungle Area. This zone's main attraction was an artificial river. Probably based on the Amazon River in design, the flowing swimming pool had a meandering form. There were also other swimming pools in its outskirts, even equipped with pulleys and ropes for athletic competitions. This added to the jungle atmosphere and probably allowed a taste of Tarzan's experiences.

Furthermore, a lot of thought had been put into this zone apart from the swimming pools. Most prominently, the pool side area was virtually covered with subtropical vegetation such as ferns and palm trees, giving an impression like swimming pools in a botanical garden.

"Nuah!? S-Scared me for a moment, there are dinosaurs here?"

"Isn't that a fake? On the other hand, your voice ended up scaring me."

The power source was probably hidden somewhere between the flourishing ferns. Fear knocked the slowly extending head of the triceratops and said:

"Anyway, Haruaki, don't miss anything shaped like a cube if you see one. I really need it."

"Yeah, I know."

Indeed, she did not have to use a Rubik's cube. According to Fear, the cube emulation could be started using "anything that's basically a cube." As for how large a discrepancy was allowed by the description "basically", this could only be determined by trial and error apparently.

"Of course we should also look for that, but our first priority is finding an emergency exit. If there isn't one in the Slides Area, then based on the distribution, I'm guessing there should be one here... But Satsuko-kun, is your foot okay?"

"Oh, sorry for troubling everyone..."

On Kaidou's back, Satsuko hunched her shoulders. Just as Kirika encouraged her and asked her to endure, Kaidou suddenly straightened her body.

"...Found it. The emergency exit."

Everyone followed her gaze. On the wall where the subtropical vegetation broke off unnaturally, there was a shining green lamp with the word "EXIT."

However, their relief only lasted but an instant. Before their eyes, yet another problem occurred. The worst one.

"...«Geist»..."

"Uh—Get down, Haruaki!"

Pushed down by Fear's pounce, Haruaki watched as the green lamp's role as the savior was instantly cut short. Directly attacked by a giant wooden beam, the emergency exit collapsed. The scene could only be described as a nightmare.

"...That's the third beam. I think she's being too generous here..."

"Fourteen! Why...!?"

Standing on the other side of the flowing swimming pool was the enemy in pursuit of Satsuko. Why? What happened to Konoha and Kuroe? Were they safe? A terrifying thought crossed Haruaki's mind.

Next to take action was Kirika, followed by Fourteen's reaction.

"The «Tragic Black River»!" "«Geist»!"

Wrapped around her arm once more, the black belt extended. At the same time, ghostlights jumped in the air to draw a complicated design, followed by a red brick shooting out at high speed.

"Gah...!"

"Cl-Class Rep!"

Although Kirika swiftly turned her body to avoid a direct hit, the red brick brushing past her neck still gouged her flesh viciously. Instantly, one particular color was scattered all around. This was soon followed by Satsuko's scream. Nevertheless, Kirika—

"Don't... look down on others...!"

Kirika continued to transmit her will to the belt. As soon as she confirmed that the end of the belt had caught Fourteen, Kirika used the momentum from her collapsing body to drag down the enemy forcefully. However, amidst her intense pain, she was unable to entangle a vital spot such as the neck and only managed to ensnare an arm. What Kirika accomplished was simply making Fourteen lose balance and fall into the flowing swimming pool. No one could blame her.

Haruaki frantically rushed over to Kirika's side and tried to support her body, but Kirika was bleeding too much. Before Haruaki's hand could touch her—

"H-Hurry and escape, Yachi... I... am fine. Immediately..."

Her face pallid, Kirika collapsed halfway through her speech. Satsuko screamed even louder at this moment. As much as Haruaki wanted to explain many things to her, there was no time.

Fourteen stood leisurely in the flowing swimming pool where the water was quite deep, as though the water current did not matter to her. Next, she

casually peeled off the limp «Tragic Black River» from her arm and started walking along the bottom of the pool, causing the water to splash about. Even underwater, the ghostlights hovering around her arm did not change in brightness, resulting in quite a sense of dissonance.

"Ahhh... Ahhhhhhhh... Ahhh... Huff, ahhh...!"

"Calm down, Satsuko, you must calm down! It's okay, Kirika is okay!"

"Th-That's right. How should I say this? Although she doesn't look fine, in actual fact, she's totally fine! And more importantly—"

"—Yachi Haruaki, I leave this child in your protection."

Kaidou slowly stepped backwards towards Haruaki. Unloading from her back the dumbfounded Satsuko who was trembling nonstop, she forced Satsuko upon Haruaki. Naturally, Satsuko was unable to stand. While holding Satsuko's limp shoulders, Haruaki asked:

"K-Kaidou-sensei? You're not thinking of...!"

"Since Ueno Kirika is unable to fight, I am the only one who can be counted on. Since an opportunity has descended once more, I must put forth my utmost effort. And I must verify... whether... I am strong or not..."

Although Haruaki did not quite understand her, he could see a certain conviction clearly in her eyes. Originally displaying complicated emotions and full of doubt, her eyes became pure and simple through the force of her entire body.

This was willpower. One that existed here, one that must exist here—the same will she displayed on that night.

Holding the shovel, Kaidou took a step forward and waited for Fourteen to slowly walk over from the bottom of the swimming pool. However—

"—Hold on. It's too weird for you to be saying 'I am the only one who can be counted on,' I should be the one saying it instead. Please retreat to the back, Kaidou-sensei."

Fear extended her hand from the side. She was facing the same direction as Kaidou and seemed to trying to stop her from advancing. Kaidou glared sharply

to the side but Fear ignored her.

"For an ordinary human, she is a very dangerous opponent. If I'm the one engaging her, I can at least withstand her attacks. If you don't want to end up like Kirika, retreat to the back."

"...My reply is negative. The option of 'retreat' does not exist in my heart. It is truly ludicrous to the extreme that someone intends to fight unarmed."

"How about you lend your weapon to me?"

"I refuse."

"H-Hold it there, you two! Now is not the time for arguing—"

The tense atmosphere was intensifying and about to explode. Haruaki did not know the correct answer but at least in this perilous atmosphere, a correct answer probably could not exist. As much as he anxiously wanted to stop the two of them, it was too late already. The tense atmosphere was exploding. It exploded due to the enemy.

Kicking the bottom of the pool, Fourteen jumped to the surface at once. Her jumping power was beyond normal—prompting a sense of dissonance in Haruaki again. But currently, his highest priority was shielding Satsuko and Kirika behind him. Fear and Kaidou ended the fruitless debate and started to put their respective powers to task.

Fourteen conjured ghostlights in the air, holding a broom in her right hand while summoning a wooden block in her left. However, Fear fearlessly slid towards her landing spot and used her left hand to block the incoming broom that carried the jump's momentum.

"Tsk... This really hurts!"

As a counterattack, using her petite fist was quite a shabby sight. But shabby as it looked, this was merely superficial appearance. Given Fear's physical strength, even a simple punch should easily floor a human with pain if she got serious. However—her punch did not strike the enemy.

Fourteen's cape and veil fluttered as she landed and she even used her momentum to extend her foot to hook Fear's lower body. Losing balance, Fear

collided into Kaidou who was swinging the shovel next to Fourteen. Haruaki watched the scene before him with despair. Since the two of them were acting independently without any cooperation or coordination. In that case, it was even worse than usual when Fear cooperated with Konoha despite constant complaints about incompatibility.

"Guh..."

Kaidou held the shovel in one hand and attacked as though reaching around Fear's petite body. But ultimately, it could not compare to the power of wielding the shovel two-handed. Fourteen easily blocked the shovel using broom and counterattacked with the wooden block in one flowing motion. Fear looked over shoulder to watch the action.

Haruaki momentarily saw the conflicted emotions in Fear's eyes but instantly got the answer. Fear did not evade precisely because of who she was. Maintaining her posture with Kaidou in her embrace, Fear willingly endured the impact.

"Guh... Ahhh..."

"You—Release me!"

"...Simply stated, this would be self-sacrifice..."

Perhaps due to hearing Fourteen's mutterings—

"I-Idiot! This~ is, umm, I can't move simply because my legs are numb... Gu... ooh... ah!"

Using her back to shield Kaidou, Fear putting up a tough front but Fourteen continued to attack relentlessly. Her petite body was forcibly enduring the tornado of continuous attacks: wooden block, wooden block, broom, wooden block, *etc.* Every attack caused Fear's body to twitch. Groaning painfully, but somehow she became more and more unable to cry out—

At this moment, Fourteen's wooden block broke with a "crack," breaking as though satisfied that the girl's screams had turned into normal breathing. Then —

"...Too weak. Indeed, one person is still..."

These words were followed by a powerful strike from the broom that swept Fear away.

Exhausted, she was completely blown away.

There seemed to be something broken, rendering her body immobile. Pain was coursing throughout all her joints.

Fear ordered herself to stand up.

She must stand up. This was all for saving Satsuko.

She recalled Satsuko's scar-covered body in the bathroom that night. Satsuko had murmured that she had always been alone.

Satsuko had said was only natural.

She even called herself useless and lowly, hence being treated that way was only natural.

Unacceptable.

That was Fear's past self. Having slaughtered and harmed hundreds of people, it could not be helped even if she spent her life in solitude—a self-deceiving cube of torture and execution confined in darkness, only able to endure her situation by lying to herself.

But she had changed. She was different now. Unlike the underground dungeon that could not be opened from within no matter what, she was able to leave that place. As long as she reached out and she did reach out. No, she was only in the middle of gradually freeing herself. So close.

Hence—Hence, Fear must stand up.

She desperately tried to apply strength in her limbs but to no avail. Her body was in great pain. She cursed that pain. The consequences after standing up swiftly flashed across her mind. The enemy was quite powerful. Supposing she cooperated with the human woman who refused to make contact with her whatsoever, could they handle the enemy? Was it possible? This happened precisely because it was not possible, right? So painful. Both her body and something not part of her body were hurting. Ahhh, anyway—

Hurry up.

I must hurry and stand up—

The dinosaur model had its head broken off beside Fear where she had collapsed. Sprawled on the floor, all she could do was breathe while enduring. That was all she could do. Although Haruaki felt compelled to rush over to her side, he could not take his eyes off the two people beside him.

"Ooh... Ah..."

Kaidou stared at Fear who was blown away then she slowly turned her gaze back to the enemy before her. She continued to breath quickly and deeply a number of times, convulsively—Then suddenly, a short while later, it was as though some sort of switch had activated...

"—Ooh, ohhhh ahhhhhhh!"

With an explosive roar, she swung the shovel with her entire body's strength. However—

It could not harm Fourteen at all. The shovel was blocked by the broom as easily as deflecting an incoming ball. Using one hand effortlessly, Fourteen casually rendered Kaidou's full-powered efforts naught.

Haruaki had concluded from a while back that the teacher was quite amazing. The strength she used to swing the shovel casually and the speed that would render even a boxer dumbfounded—these attributes could only be described as amazing. Even now, this assessment had not changed. But ultimately, the qualifier "for a normal human" had to be added—

Currently standing before her eyes was an enemy exceeding that domain. An enemy beyond ordinary humans.

"Ah..."

Kaidou's gaze flashed with hesitation. Haruaki had never seen that level of distortion in her eyes before. This was a warning sign of imminent collapse.

Fourteen took half a step forward, closing in on her.

Then at a distance almost close enough for Kaidou to feel her breath, she muttered softly—

And delivered the final sentence.

"...Although it is only natural, you are very weak."

"O-Ooh, ah—!"

Instantly, Kaidou's gaze collapsed. Crushed by many emotions, she abandoned all thought and shook her head in astonishment, simply breathing like a wild beast.

Fourteen did not miss the signs. Neither did she have any intention of showing mercy.

Immediately, the broom was swung, sending Kaidou flying in the direction opposite to Fear. Breaking the stems and trunks of subtropical plants as she flew, she smashed into the wall on the side and slid to the ground.

"K-Kaidou-sensei...!"

Haruaki clenched his fist. He was the only one remaining now. Although it was unclear how the situation would develop and he did not think he could be of much use, now that Haruaki was the only one left, he had no choice but to pit his all against her—

"So, logically speaking, you two shouldn't be dead yet..."

Shifting her gaze left and right, Fourteen looked at the two who were blown away, stepping forward as though she could not decide whom she should deliver the killing blow to first. Haruaki absolutely could not allow her to succeed. His legs trembling, just as Haruaki intended to step up and block her—

"Enough... Satsuko thinks it's... enough. If your target is Satsuko, then..."

Satsuko moved even faster than Haruaki and walked towards Fourteen.

"What... Hey, wait up, Satsuko!"

"Satsuko... won't wait. That person's target is Satsuko. As long as Satsuko

steps up, it'll all end... If that's the case, no problem. As long as Satsuko steps up, Fear-san and the others won't be hurt any further... It's all Satsuko's fault that things developed to this. Satsuko a-already had enough...!"

Haruaki was extremely shocked.

"W-Wait up! Don't do this! If you go over, you know what will happen, right —!?"

"...You mean... something like torture? No problem, it's better than watching this happen... Also, Satsuko doesn't have that whatever doll in the first place. If it's repeated to her, perhaps she'll believe eventually..."

"No... Don't... do it... Cough cough..."

Haruaki was startled by the voice coming from extremely nearby. It turned out to be Kirika who had opened her eyes slightly and was looking up towards him. The wound on her neck had not healed completely yet and the pain was causing her to frown. She continued to squeeze out a weak voice from the depths of her throat—

"I'm... fine. I won't die... So..."

Kirika's eyes pleaded with Haruaki to stop her. Indeed, Haruaki was currently the only one who could stop Satsuko. Nodding firmly to respond to Kirika, Haruaki then turned his gaze towards Satsuko's back. But in that instant, Fourteen's hand was already moving towards them. If they stepped forward, something would definitely shoot out. Thinking "even so, I can't just sit here and do nothing," Haruaki was about to take action and by trusting his reflexes when—

"No, it's too dangerous... It's okay. Really... It's okay..."

Satsuko's voice was sorrowful. Her steps slowly took her into the line of sight between Fourteen and Haruaki. Even if Fourteen shot anything, she was still able to block it with her body, able to protect Haruaki with her body. Holding his breath, Haruaki stopped walking.

"...How could it... be okay...!?"

Just at this moment, with silver hair dangling, Fear dragged her body and

stood up. With many bruises lingering on her arms and legs, all covered with injuries was the only apt description. Nevertheless, she still stood up. Clenching her fist, her only weapon, she took a step forward.

"...Don't do... anything stupid. Why do you think... we are fighting!?"

Frowning from pain, Fear turned her gaze towards Kaidou who was lying without moving on the floor with only her face up to watch the situation. She was silent because she could not speak—or perhaps because she chose not to speak.

"For Satsuko's sake... Right..? But, hence... Sorry... It's... enough. Even if you don't fight for someone like Satsuko, it's okay."

Satsuko's attitude was very stubborn, but her stubbornness was wrong, absolutely. Haruki gained courage after he looked at Fear's face and confirmed that she thought so. But when he looked at Satsuko's back again—He seemed to catch something in the corner of his vision.

Described in one word, it was salvation.

However, Fear did not seem like she noticed it. Her tone of voice became even more violent.

"You're saying 'someone like Satsuko' again! You're too foolish! You're no longer alone—You're not isolated anymore! You are my friend. How can I stand back and not help a friend!?"

Approaching Fourteen slowly, Satsuko stopped when she heard that sentence. But without looking back, she replied:

"We... are... friends...?"

"Of course! At least, that's what I believe—What about you!?"

This question seemed to make Satsuko look up slightly. "She probably caught sight of reinforcements," Haruaki thought to himself.

If she saw the signs, logically speaking, she should be halting her steps. But Satsuko advanced once again. In that case, that meant she still had not noticed the figure of assistance who was quietly approaching Fourteen from behind—

Satsuko murmured:

"Yes. Satsuko... also believes in being friends with you. Completely... friends. Ah, hence..."

Clenching her fist, Fear sprinted forward while Satsuko took the final step and arrived at the enemy's side. Fourteen spread both arms as though welcoming her.

Then as Haruaki watched. He watched with an exhilarating feeling of "Success!"

He saw the instant when Konoha approached Fourteen from behind without making a sound and swung her karate chop.

However—

In that very instant, he was rendered completely at a loss as though the world had shattered completely, because—

"Hence—having become friends, a duel cannot be avoided."

Because Satsuko reached into Fourteen's body beside her and drew out a weapon from beneath the cloth wrapped around her torso and blocked Konoha's chopping hand as though protecting Fourteen.

Chapter 5 - The Place Where Strength Lies.

There, / "In hand"

Part 1

Incomprehensible. What could this scene mean?

From inside Fourteen's body, Satsuko had taken out an electric drill that one would use for leisure carpentry. Although it was the size of a hand gun, the slender drill bit installed on its tip was abnormally long—Roughly a meter or so. This steel drill was what Satsuko had use to deflect Konoha's knife hand.

"W-What...?"

"Of course it's a drill. Didn't Satsuko mention last time that she loved drills? Although it's only natural for you to forget the worthless words of someone like Satsuko, it does make one feel empty inside... And drills really are super cool! Full of dreams—"

"I-I'm not asking you about that! You... what on earth... Why..."

Fear was staring at Satsuko in disbelief while Fourteen stood by Satsuko's side. The veil on her face was turned towards Konoha who had hastily pulled back after her attack was deflected, as well as Kuroe who had pursued together with Konoha. Kirika was still lying on the floor, her eyes displaying bewilderment. Kaidou's situation was apparently the same as Kirika's, except that her eyes expressed greater confusion than anyone else present.

"You're asking... why? Well—Satsuko always says that she is a cowardly and useless person. Hence, Satsuko must become strong... That's what Satsuko told

the teacher once."

Satsuko sneaked a glance at Kaidou but immediately turned her gaze back towards Fear.

"Also, the higher-ups keep telling Satsuko that 'If you want to become strong, you need to hone yourself on a mental level as well.' That is completely right. Satsuko believes that strong people have strong minds too. For example—Even if a friend turned into an enemy, a strong person would still fight without hesitation. Hence, Satsuko decided she must develop that strength. Although the process is very painful, if it could be achieved, then even her willpower will become strong... Something like that. So that's why Satsuko did this."

"Wha... I don't understand, I really don't get it. What on earth are you talking about...?"

"The same goes for me. Could you please stick to the main points? —No, just give me the main points!"

Still in a stance with her knife hand ready, Konoha adjusted her choice of wording.

"Even if you ask Satsuko to give the main points, it's a bit difficult. Well... Anyway, Satsuko boldly decided to attempt making friends with everyone. For this goal, Satsuko had to resort to many lies and a lot of acting."

"Lies... Where did they start?"

Kuroe tilted her head in puzzlement. Satsuko made her usual timid smile and said:

"Uh—Well... Simply stated, almost everything."

"__"

Everyone held their breath in surprise. Perhaps feeling the current atmosphere, Satsuko continued nonchalantly:

"Satsuko is not a student. Everything about her family and parents is false. Staying overnight at Haruaki-san's home was for the sake of establishing friendly relations with you all. The «Crying and Screaming Headless Doll» does not exist. Naturally, Fourteen was never out for Satsuko's life. Rather, this girl is

Satsuko's partner. The plan to drive her away was decided beforehand all along. In order to gain everyone's trust... Up until this point, the entire situation was for deepening Satsuko's friendship with everyone. Because you invited Satsuko specially to have fun at the pool, Satsuko thought that the chance was perfect and even put in lots of effort to create a suitable sense of crisis... For example, Satsuko pretended to sprain her ankle so as to buy time for Fourteen to circle around to locate you guys. Satsuko tried very hard to arrange many details. Uh~ As for what's real... Probably the fact that Satsuko has no sense of direction and is a super fan of occult goods. Oh of course, Ontenzaki Satsuko is also her real name. But the name of someone like Satsuko probably isn't something important in your eyes..."

Fear simply stood rooted to the spot in shock as she listened to her. Seeing Fear's expression, Haruaki could not help but recall Satsuko's voice, her timid smile and the happy looks when Fear and the others interacted with her.

So virtually everything was fake.

Everything from the very beginning until just now.

Unbelievably, everything that had happened since Satsuko visited their home turned out to be deception?

Even now, Haruaki still could not believe it. But if everything she said was not a lie—it could explain all her past words and actions as well as the nagging sense of minute dissonance behind them. Indeed it could.

For example, there was her exceptional readiness in accepting the existence of cursed tools. As the time, Haruaki had found her ability to understand things quite unbelievable but was convinced upon hearing her describe herself as a obsessive fan of occult goods. Were she already involved with this world, then it would have been completely matter-of-fact. Then there was the way she froze completely as soon as she opened a textbook. This would be the expected behavior of anyone not a student. Then there was the way she spoke to her parents on the phone. Speaking to parents in a completely uninhibited manner was within reason. However, if the other side was not her parent—indeed, a familiar partner for example—it would be perfectly natural. Then there was the convenience of using a phone, such as obtaining permission to stay out

overnight or taking steps to arrange a late night assault—

Haruaki felt dizzy. There was a feeling as though suddenly realizing the world itself was just a dream. The sense of reality was disappearing from reality. He could not understand, why did it come to this? He still could not understand.

"Partner... Speaking of which, the Dominion's knights have partners known as 'auxiliaries.' In that case, you must be—"

Konoha glared severely at Satsuko. However, Satsuko simply inclined her head in surprise.

"Oh, you're mistaken. That's also fake. Satsuko has nothing to with the Knight's Dominion at all. Satsuko only borrowed that name because it matched the setting of Satsuko being hunted down."

"What... You're not part of the Knights Dominion? In that case, why!? Why did you do this? Deliberately getting in our good graces—Then proceeding to make enemies of us!"

"Hasn't Satsuko explained it already?"

"I heard you spouting nonsense about strengthening your willpower, but I still don't understand what you mean! Why must you go so far to make yourself strong? What is your goal!?"

At this moment, Fourteen suddenly fluttered her veil and broke her silence:

"—Satsuko, the way I see it, you've forgotten to say the most important thing. It's fine if you want to tell the whole story clearly, but don't spend too much time on that. Hurry and settle things."

"S-Satsuko was just about to say it! Satsuko can't stand you, Fourt, always talking at inappropriate times! Also, it's all because you speak too little that Satsuko must talk nonstop like this! So asking Satsuko to hurry up is too mean of you!"

Fourt was her nickname? The current Satsuko seemed like a different person compared to the way she acted in the company of Fear and the others earlier. The usual sense of unnecessary timidity was completely gone. Furthermore, their attitudes towards each other was testament to their close relationship.

Just as Fourteen nonchalantly muttered "...very sorry about that," Satsuko went "Hmm—" and pouted:

"Satsuko can't feel your sincerity!"

"Ah..."

Then Satsuko's fingers ripped through the air towards the veil on Fourteen's face. Unexpectedly, the face of the girl behind the veil looked even younger than imagined. A completely ordinary face of a girl's. But under everyone's gaze, her face gradually turned as red as an apple and she even raised her voice by an octave:

"I-It's very embarrassing for the curtains to be drawn... Satsuko, please stop now...!"

"Are you reflecting now?"

Satsuko even went as far as to pinch Fourteen's exposed cheek lightly. This physical punishment caused Fourteen to reply tearfully:

"I-I am reflecting on my behavior. Reflecting deeply and sincerely too. So please, cover it up...!"

Saying "I hope so," Satsuko moved her fingers away. Apparently, the piece of cloth could slide towards the side. Fourteen swiftly pulled the curtain with her hand and muttered in her usual voice:

"...Please have mercy on me."

"It's you, Fourt, who was acting too naughty~ You were this close to receiving the punishment of no sweeping for a week."

"...Anything but that. Truly, please have mercy..."

Feeling completely perplexed, Haruaki's group could only speechlessly watch their conversation from the side. Satsuko turned to them once more and said:

"Uh... Sorry to shock everyone. So anyway, would you all have a look at this?"

While speaking, Satsuko stabbed her drill's long tip into the side of her swimsuit and slowly moved it towards the other side, causing the swimsuit to rip apart noisily... Next to appear before everyone's eyes was her pale white

skin of course. Satsuko reached towards the tear that had turned her swimsuit into a two-piece. Muttering "there we go," she pushed the remaining fabric of the lower half down to expose even more skin. Then she pushed further to below her tiny navel. Haruaki could see something resembling a birthmark on a spot which could be considered her lower abdomen. Normally, Fear and Konoha would surely rush over to block Haruaki's eyes but on this occasion, just like Haruaki, they both stared at Satsuko's birthmark.

But they all immediately realized that it was not a birthmark but a tattoo.

Colored green as a base, it approached a hexagon in shape... Indeed, it was a design that seemed to use reptile scales as a motif.

"...What is that...? Back then... You said you had a huge scar..."

"Oh, right~ Satsuko also told Fear-san another lie. Satsuko lied about having a scar here. However, Satsuko's identity would be leaked if you saw it, which would be troubling, so Satsuko deliberately hid it. However, all scars apart from this are real. They were caused by bullying in the past. All the scars from back then remain on Satsuko's body indeed. But among them, quite a few were left behind purely from battles."



"What..."

Fear was rendered speechless. Satsuko smiled in response. Her smile looked really happy.

"Fear-san, you only treated Satsuko as a friend because you pitied Satsuko for being a victim of bullying and was alone all this time, right? Satsuko did not lie about that part. Hence, Satsuko and Fear-san's friendship is not a lie after all... Ehehe, Satsuko is so happy. Right, let's get back to the topic just now."

Pushing the torn swimsuit down, Satsuko seemed to be deliberately displaying the tattoo to Haruaki's group as she continued:

"This is a mark. For members of the «Draconians» such as Satsuko, everyone has this type of tattoo somewhere on their body—"

"The «Draconians»...?"

Haruaki had heard the name before. He turned to look at Kirika who knew the most details but she was still in newly revived state and only shook her head silently.

"That's right, but there's no mark on Fourt's body. Although she's a member, only humans are entitled to these Dragon Wounds."

"Really... So that explains the earlier feeling that something was out of place. She's not human, so that means she's one of our kind? No wonder her movements are so unnatural."

"Firing laundry poles into the swimming pool and jumping from pole to pole, I don't think that's even possible for us."

"But during the cultural festival earlier, we did encounter someone who seemed capable of such skills... Consequently, that person skewed our standards of judgment."

"Oh by the way, the «Warehouse Cloak» is also a lie. The cape is only used to match the image. Being able to take out or put in many things is simply Fourt's power. Although the decision to treat it as the cape's ability was made beforehand, the name was improvised by Fourt... Come to think of it now, that was really sloppy. But speaking of why this was done, it's because if Fourt's

identity as a Wathe was found out too early, then it'd be troublesome once you guys questioned who the 'owner' was."

"That sort of thing... is not important."

Clenching fists that were almost about to fly out, gritting teeth that were about to shatter, Fear yelled as her whole body shuddered:

"Tell me now, what are the «Draconians»?!? What goal does this organization have!?"

"Uh—Hasn't Satsuko repeated that many times already? Namely, they desire to become strong, stronger than anything else. To become the strongest existence."

"What...?"

Satsuko lightly pressed on her drill's grip, causing a spinning sound to be heard from the pool side several times. Then looking at her weapon, she said:

"This is «Mr. Big»... Obviously a Wathe. Wathes are very scary and amazing things, right? Why do these things exist? Once obtained, what should humans do with them? Once such amazing things are obtained, becoming strong is only natural, because they are able to do so many amazing things. Since that's the case—perhaps one could call them things that exist to make humans stronger?"

"..."

"If that is the meaning of Wathes' existence, then it's meaningless unless one becomes the strongest. Everyone tries to become the strongest through their respective ways. Of course, even the Commander, whom someone like Satsuko finds scary to talk to, has always strived to become the strongest."

"How absolutely ludicrous... How can something like being the strongest be decided? Don't tell me you resort to duels?"

Konoha ridiculed the idea but Satsuko nodded and answered seriously.

"Ah yes, that's what happens. But that feels something like... a segment of the training to become strong... Uh—To this date, no human has ever achieved the goal of «Strongest» that Satsuko and the Draconians seek. Hence, everyone aims for that target. According to the Commander, that 'as yet unachieved

strongest existence'... No one has ever seen, made contact or talked to it before. Conceptually, it is the strongest, almost like the progenitor of a new species. In other words, this is what Satsuko and her comrades call this existence—Namely, the «Dragon»."

"You must be... joking. We exist to make humans stronger? Cow Tits is right, this is absolutely ludicrous. We simply exist, that's all. We sin and get cursed, and simply exist, that's all."

"..Curses are the reasons why we exist, but they are not the meaning of our existence..."

Fourteen muttered. Fear glared viciously at her own kind.

"This is too crazy. You're just as crazy as that cross from the Family, just in a different way..."

"I disagree. Since we harm humans and possess powers for harming humans, there is meaning in the curse. The curse has its meaning."

Just as repeated so many times in the past, Fourteen caressed the veil on her face with her fingertips as she replied. Fear was furious to the point of gritting her teeth hard. At this moment, Fear glared severely at Satsuko again as she walked towards Fourteen.

"So that's pretty much it for the explanations... Oh, please don't look at Satsuko with that kind of gaze, Fear-san. Actually, Satsuko is suffering too. Uh—the higher-ups gave battle authorization of which the targets include everyone near the Yachi home, especially the primary intended opponent, Fear-san. So Satsuko will naturally try hard, especially towards Fear-san, trying her best to become good friends with you no matter what..."

So that was why she did all that?

That was why Satsuko became Fear's best friend? The primary reason was not whether they got along well together but due to deliberate, calculated efforts to deepen their relationship—Then to trample all over Fear's feelings.

Absolutely terrible.

This was the only thought going through Haruaki's mind.

But Satsuko continued and fully expressed her terrible behavior.

"Ah, on the other hand, perhaps it's better if you glared at Satsuko. If you treat Satsuko as your friend, you won't be able to fight at your full strength, then Satsuko would be in a dilemma... Yes, it's very important for Satsuko to see Fear-san as a friend right now. But how Fear-san thinks of Satsuko is totally irrelevant to Satsuko."

"..."

"Wawa, everyone's eyes are becoming even more scary...! Uh—Umm, then it's about time to start fighting! After all, getting authorization was not easy, hence even someone weak like Satsuko will devote her all to the fight... Fourt!"

"...Yes..."

"Okay, let's get the holster first."

Satsuko moved her hand through the sarashi on her partner's chest as though searching for something, causing Fourteen to exhale lightly. The object she mentioned fell out from between the sarashi—a belt connected to many leather holders. Using one hand, Satsuko attached it to her thigh and murmured:

"...«Dr. Distinguish»."

This time, a scalpel with dark red stains fell out and she secured it in her holster.

"«Impedance to Ethical Lines»."

This was a vicious frozen food cleaver with a serrated edge. She placed it in her holster. This was followed by a hammer, a knife as well as many unfamiliar looking blades and blunt weapons. All of them entered the holster.

"H-Hey, no way... Are they all... cursed tools...?"

Unbelievable. Suffering so many curses was undoubtedly suicidal behavior. Hearing Haruaki's groan—

"Relax—Most of these have very light curses. The only powerful ones are... Oh right, there's this drill and Fourt, as well as... One more. Please take out «Raizawaseri's Proof»."

"Understood."

What Satsuko finally held in her hand was a yellow boxcutter, a piece of stationery that one could find anywhere. However, one person at the scene reacted dramatically towards it.

Kaidou had been lying on the floor, listening in a daze so far. Suddenly, she stared wide-eyed and pushed against the floor with her trembling arms. Then her entire body began to shudder nonstop. She looked up and said:

"W...H...Y..."

"Eh?"

"I said... Why!? Why would that thing be here!?"

She yelled as though she were about to spit blood. Kaidou's gaze was locked onto one location—The boxcutter in Satsuko's hand.

"That is... Ahhh... what Satsu... once possessed... Impossible, how can it be here...!?"

"Eh, you know this boxcutter? This really feels like destiny~ If you ask why it's here, Satsuko is left scratching her head. Because this wasn't Satsuko's to begin with—Just as Satsuko mentioned before, members of the Draconians sometimes engage in something similar to duels. The rules allow the winner to take away one of the loser's Wathes. For a weak human like Satsuko, victory must have been luck, but it was under such circumstances that..."

"Guh... Urghhh—"

Kaidou bit her lip hard. This was not anger. Rather, it seemed like she was reprimanding herself for her helplessness.

"So, Satsuko is all ready! Satsuko may be very weak, but she will try hard and use all sorts of Wathes like this, so please treat her well!"

"W-Wait up... Hold on first!"

Haruaki spoke frantically, causing Satsuko to incline her head in puzzlement. Haruaki was simply trying to buy time to calm his mind, but she interpreted his words on her own:

"Wait for what? Oh—Because the explanation of the curses isn't finished yet? But it's really nothing. This drill and boxcutter only have ordinary curses compelling the owner to hurt people. The drill seems to have undergone some kind of modification to eliminate the impulse to harm others. As for the boxcutter, Satsuko normally uses Fourteen's back to vent the desire to hurt someone. Rather, Satsuko should say that the upcoming battle will help vent the impulse. Then there's Fourteen's curse... Well~ It makes someone stop growing like this. For Satsuko, it's really like a curse. Despite how Satsuko looks, Satsuko is actually twenty-one years old already."

A completely unexpected age was heard. Despite Haruaki's group's astonishment, Fourteen simply muttered calmly:

"Rather than a curse, it can be considered a benefit. Because there are people in the past who entered my body to seek longevity and eternal youth."

"Really? Perhaps that happens because of widespread rumors of immortal witches remaining forever young? The real curse is that the owner must kidnap humans and bring them inside Fourt's body where they will weaken and die. If that's not done, the owner would weaken and die instead... Although the curse eventually strengthens to the point where one cannot catch up, so in the end, everyone wastes away and dies."

"...I really hope that will only arrive in the distant future."

Satsuko continued to supplement her explanation. For example, there was the female high schooler whom she "first kidnapped and borrowed her uniform and school bag" as well as her family she lived with in the apartment, and the people from the water park this time. Although putting that many people inside does not necessarily produce a better result, it did mean that Satsuko was probably safe from the curse within the near future.

Hearing her explanations, Haruaki was struck by many more thoughts. Since she had used the first female student's background as her cover, there had been chances to expose that lie. For example, during the nights when they were keeping watch, a single visit to the apartment where Satsuko was most likely staying alone. During the day, she obviously did not attend classes so she probably hid somewhere to spend her time after Haruaki's group escorted her

to school. Had they spent one day protecting her in class, the lie would have been exposed.

But these thoughts were already too late. Racking one's brain over things that were too late did not help at all. The most important thing at hand, deserving of deep thought, was more simple—the fact that *humans were kidnapped and concealed inside Fourteen's body*.

In other words, Sovereignty and Shiraho must be rescued.

...As well as all the other captured people, they must be rescued at all costs.

"On further thought, your situation does not matter to us at all. For us, the most important thing right now, is the fact that you are the enemy who deceived us..."

"On the other hand, we should count our blessings now that we no longer need to expend effort to help a certain person escape. What we needed to do has not changed, really."

"Indeed, I am able to help this time."

"Are you okay, Class Rep...?"

Kirika's wound was finally healed up, hence she slowly sat up. Rubbing her neck where flesh had been scraped off earlier, she nodded and replied:

"Yes, I'm fine. You should take the teacher... along with Fear-kun and retreat to the side. After all, you lack weapons, and also—Fear-kun's emotional state can't adjust that easily, right?"

She whispered the latter half of her words to Haruaki only. Fear was still glaring at Satsuko, using all her strength to question—"Why are you doing this?"

But the question did not reach Satsuko's ears. Or rather, in her view, she had already answered it.

"So, it's finally time to enter the fray officially! Weak little Satsuko will do her best!"

She was wielding the drill in her right hand and the boxcutter in her left. Naturally, on her thigh was the leather holster carrying all the weapons she had

taken out earlier. On the other hand, Fourteen held a broom in one hand while flying ghostlights surrounded her arms.

Konoha, Kuroe and Kirika shifted their positions in preparation to oppose the two approaching enemies.

"I still don't quite understand what this is all about. Hopefully... you can tell me as a fellow cursed tool. There are too many inexplicable aspects to your behavior, hence, I've been full of questions all along."

"That can be easily rectified. I simply move the objects inside my body... Things that belong in my body can be taken out and will be strengthened. They can also be shot out. As for objects that did not exist inside me originally... Such as Satsuko's Wathes and the like, they are simply taken out without modification. Hence, there is nothing inexplicable."

"Things... that belong in your body? You're some kind of vessel?"

Konoha continued to pursue the matter. Fourteen livened up the ghostlights' movements as she summoned a new wooden block from midair. At the same time—

She announced her true identity.

"In a certain sense. Speaking of my original name, I am «Coonsberry's Haunted House of Death on Fourteenth Avenue». Reportedly, there was once a certain psychotic woman who was obsessed with magic. She imprisoned several dozen people and murdered them. Then the witch made her residence inside —"

"...*A cursed house.*"

Part 2

Blue-white ghostlights flew about, tracing out many trails in the air.

"«Geist». The strange fires swaggering about inside the witch's house. Your favorite time, that of disorder, has arrived—Let everything within reach fly. No need for mercy, I permit you to riot in this house! Come, «Geist», «Geist»! «Polter»—«Geist»!"

Timber, glass knives from broken windows, laundry poles, red bricks and countless other objects appeared from the ghostlights' trails. Next, as Fourteen extended her arm, those strange objects began to fly all at once—

"Who could have expected a cursed house. It's my first time to encounter such a large-scale member of our kind... But now is not the time to be amazed. And no matter how much I try, I won't be able to block everything. Try to dodge as appropriate!"

"Understood! Haruaki-kun, you guys retreat to the back!"

Kuroe's hair undulated up and down while Konoha and Kirika instantly jumped away from their previous position. Shortly after, a symphony of destruction rocked the swimming pool.

The battle started. Haruaki bit his lip and grabbed Fear's hand while she remained rooted to the spot. Then he dragged her away. After all, Kirika was right. This girl wanted to fight barehanded, but with Satsuko and Fourteen as the opponents, coming out unscathed would be absolutely impossible.

"W-What are you doing? Haruaki! Let me go, I also have to... fight—"

"That's completely impossible for you right now. Let's go over to the teacher first. Since she's already hurt and also needs to find a place to hide, I can't do it alone. Come over and help me."

"Muu..."

Despite her reluctance, Fear kept her mouth shut and did not speak. The two of them circled around Konoha's group and made their way to the pool side. Having flown and crashed into the wall, the teacher was now using the wall to support her back while she forced herself to stand up on her trembling legs.

"Kaidou-sensei, are you okay!?"

Haruaki asked out of courtesy, but she did not look okay at all. Although she had not bled too much, she had been flung into a concrete wall by a large force after all, so there should be a few cracked bones at least, right? Furthermore, her eyes were staring emptily towards a certain place... Haruaki surmised that not only her physical but also her mental state must have suffered heavy trauma. As for whether it was critical, that would be unknown.

"Anyway, let's retreat to the next zone first."

"..."

Kaidou's gaze remained fixed. Hence, Haruaki sighed as he forced his way under her and propped her up by the shoulder. After he started walking forward, Kaidou finally started moving, dragging her feet. Haruaki could feel that instead of moving by her own volition, her body simply walked helplessly out of habit as a result of being pushed forward.

"Fear, if anything comes flying from behind, you must let me know."

"Y-Yeah..."

Just at this moment—

"Ah... P-Please wait! Don't run away! Satsuko's original goal is to fight Fear-san. If you do that, Satsuko will be very troubled—!"

"Y-You're very annoying!"

Fear looked back and scolded harshly.

Standing by Fourteen's side, Satsuko brandished the drill and the boxcutter in her hands as she spoke:

"If everyone does not fight with their full power, Satsuko will be very troubled—Isn't it fine even if you don't have a cube for a tool...? *As long as you let Haruaki use your own body.*"

"Tsk..."

Fear's face was twisted by anger. For Fear, that should be something she would rather die than allow to happen, because in a very true sense, letting someone use her would completely contravene her wish of "never harming anyone again."

"Don't listen to her, Fear, let's go!"

"Indeed, stop spacing out! I will handle this person!"

Konoha charged straight at Satsuko. Haruaki warned her not to force herself too much then began to move. On the other hand, Fear simply followed without saying a word.

They passed through a glass door and moved to another zone, the completely deserted and silent Slides Area.

"Kaidou-sensei, how are your injuries...?"

"..."

The two of them allowed the teacher to lean against the wall as they asked about her condition. However, Kaidou did not answer but simply stared empty at her feet... Clearly she had suffered a great shock.

(How troubling~ I must at least confirm whether she's fine. Otherwise, there's no way I can go back to help the girls without worrying...)

Although Haruaki was unable help out much, he decided it would be better to keep more options open by being there to wield Konoha in case she needed to transform into a sword.

Just when Haruaki was sighing and wondering what he should do next, suddenly entering his view was—

Standing nearby, Fear was displaying an expression that indicated she had made some kind of decision. Then with heavy footsteps, she walked over to the teacher.

"Ah~ Satsuko believes that Fear and the others will return eventually,

anyway... Having to fight the gentle Konoha-san who lent Satsuko her pajamas, Satsuko feels so conflicted... Oh how her heart breaks. But it'd be meaningless unless Satsuko does this, so Satsuko will try hard..."

"Actually, I'm not gentle at all, so don't feel brokenhearted. You'd better not expect me to show any mercy."

"Sob sob, Satsuko is very weak, please pay attention when the time comes..."

Hunching her shoulders while she spoke, Satsuko's shadow began to change. Of course, her petite body did not change, but the weapons in her hands were happily altering their form in response to her killing intent.

The drill in her right was spinning away noisily.

The boxcutter in her left was clicking away noisily.

The drill's slender bit and the boxcutter's blade made noises respectively as they extended forward. Originally long to begin with, the drill became even longer. Hidden inside the boxcutter, the blade formed by joining countless razor blades now extended to roughly a meter long. These two tools' lengths were both beyond the expectations of common sense and one could not possibly find the mechanism for containing them. But to Konoha, there was nothing to be surprised about, because they were both cursed.

"So..."

Seeing Satsuko's twin hair buns bob slightly, Konoha did not expect her to lean forward and rush over instantly. So fast.

"!"

Konoha dodged the drill that was suddenly thrust over, meanwhile using a karate chop to receive the attacking boxcutter. Although she used a kick to counterattack, this was swiftly blocked by the drill that had been swiftly pulled back.

"Wah—Sorry, because you are fighting someone like Satsuko, you are holding back, right...? But if that's the case, it doesn't improve Satsuko's training, so please fight seriously—!"

Satsuko bent forward as she swung the boxcutter up, aiming for Konoha's

abdomen. Konoha attempted to sever it with a karate chop and the boxcutter blade did end up breaking. But no—that boxcutter's blade had scattered apart on its own where the individual razors connected. Konoha did not feel the expected resistance and slightly lost balance. At this moment, the boxcutter recovered the length of its blade with a series of clicking and came slicing from the opposite direction. Konoha frantically retreated backwards.

This was just as challenging to handle as Fourteen's wooden blocks. Furthermore, this boxcutter was apparently able to break its own blade according to the user's will. It looked like it could extend indefinitely for there was no guarantee that the blade was at its maximum length—To be honest, it was quite hard to judge the weapon's range.

"You... How on earth do you call this weak!?"

Satsuko's expression remained timid and cowardly, but her body's movements were outrageously fast. Her level of ability was clearly high enough that Konoha could not afford to hold back.

Hence, Konoha decided to stop believing whatever Satsuko said from this point onwards. Once again, her karate chop clashed with the electric drill's bit.

"Oh dear... Kono-san looks quite tied up."

"Yes, that doesn't look like an easy opponent at all... How many more lies did that girl actually tell?"

Kirika dodged the incoming timber as she replied to Kuroe, but just at this moment—

"...For the sake of Satsuko's honor, let me first correct you two here. Satsuko was not trying to deceive... Indeed, some call her the «Tailender Syndrome»."

"What?"

While stroking her veil, Fourteen explained as she stood on the opposite side of the swimming pool.

"...The truth is that Satsuko really believes she is very weak. She is convinced that it's impossible for her to be powerful. Simply stated, that is her

personality... Then as a result of her utter lack of confidence, she ends up hoping desperately to make herself stronger in earnest. Exactly because of that—I acknowledged Satsuko as my owner."

Just as she finished talking, the ghostlights proceeded to draw circles. Clearly she did not wish to talk further.

"Mode: «Cushioning Munemori»!"

"...«Tragic Black River»!"

Blocked by the soft, spread out hair, the bricks lost momentum and fell down. Using her belt to grab bricks in midflight, Kirika twisted the belt and sent the bricks back at Fourteen like throwing stones. Although her projectile speed was inferior to Fourteen's, this merely served to hinder the enemy's movements. Just as Fourteen fluttered her cape while dodging the wave of attack—

"I see it again! New move: «Dinosaur Narimori»!"

Kuroe used her hair to pick up a nearby mechanical triceratops and threw it at Fourteen like a hammer. However, the enemy swiftly took out a round table from her body and used it as a shield against the dinosaur attack. This impact easily caused the triceratops' parts to scatter and fly. Although the table cracked as well, Fourteen simply murmured "Another mess again... How annoying" without suffering any damage herself.

"Hmm, too bad it's an improvised move that I can only use here."

"Kuroe-kun... Are you actually fighting seriously?"

Hearing Kuroe sound so leisurely, Kirika finally erupted in a scolding tone of voice, but Kuroe explained nonchalantly:

"Of course I'm serious. I will try out any method as long as it's within my ability. Even if it's lame or completely pointless, I'll try it out first before judging... This is all done for the sake of rescuing Sovey-chan and Shiraho-chan."

Kuroe's eyes were the same as usual, partially closed as though she were sleepy. But in spite of that, one could feel a sense of seriousness from her. No, rather than serious—It would be better to say she was filled with grim determination. Her eyes displayed resolve and great anxiety, as well as anger

that was not overtly expressed.

"But let me clarify something. Specifically, I had no intention of judging your attack just now... I believe it's the best way to make up for a lack of destructive power. But what made me concerned, whether you were serious or not, was the name of the move."

"Very regrettably, that probably cannot be helped. Based on the iron principle that yelling out the names of super moves will make them more powerful, I must think up move names as much as possible."

"...R-Really? If that's what you insist, never mind... Hmm!"

Something flew over, causing them to dodge by jumping to the side. Although Kirika suffered a minor laceration on her arm, this did not pose any problems and she immediately stood up in response to Kuroe's gaze.

"Anyway, I agree with what you said about 'trying out any method as long as it's within my ability.' Whether my body, my brain or tools, I will use anything that comes in handy... Speaking of which, I discovered something that could prove advantageous to our side. Those giant—probably support pillars in the house—It's highly unlikely that she will throw any more of those."

"Oh~ How so?"

"If she had a way to fire those pillars en masse, she would have done so already. Decidedly, she can only attack using objects that definitely exist inside the house. In other words, from her standpoint, attacking means consuming herself at the same time. Things like bricks might be endlessly abundant, but that cannot be the case for the pillars of a house."

"I see. If she attacks too much, she could end up losing more than she bargained for... Ah!"

Kuroe's hair swiftly deflected an incoming block of wood and changed its trajectory. Flying into a pool, the wood made a huge splash.

"It's true that I don't want to fire any more pillars... But simply stated, if your plan is to exhaust my ammunition, that is futile. The space I can use is vast. The poltergeists have endless toys to play with."

"Don't look down on me who lives in a small room—Mode: «Killing Machine Masakado»!"

Kuroe complained strangely as she extended her hair. In order to perform a simultaneous attack, Kirika also swung the «Tragic Black River» as she glanced behind her.

However, there were still no signs of Haruaki and the others returning.

Part 3

Then Fear bowed her head and looked at Kaidou—arrogantly with her chest puffed out—and extended her hand.

"...Gimme."

Her instruction was short and to the point, as though what she demanded was perfectly natural. Even if she were to add "rice crackers" at the end, it would not sound unnatural at all.

But right now, Fear was not demanding rice crackers.

Instead, it was the shovel in Kaidou's hand.

Kaidou's long hair slid as she looked up at Fear but she did not relax her grip on the shovel.

Fear sighed.

"You don't intend to give it to me, right? Yes~ In that case—Why aren't you moving?"

"Hey—Fear..."

"Be quiet, Haruaki. I am currently speaking with the teacher."

Fear glared at the teacher. Kaidou gazed back at her silently, a sense of unease suddenly flashing across her eyes—Finally, she spoke a long awaited answer:

"The boxcutter in her hand... Used to be my sister's..."

She looked down again as though trying to forcefully suppress the surging pain. But still, she continued to speak. It was basically the same story as what Haruaki had heard the night before the final exams—except in much greater detail. For example, there was how her younger sister had been bullied yet she remained in the dark about it, how her sister obtained the boxcutter, how her

sister suddenly slashed her one day with that boxcutter, as well as how her sister committed suicide by jumping off the building, shocked by what she had done to her elder sister, *etc.*

"But then that boxcutter... To think it would fall into the hands of that child... That child whom looks so much like my sister... I cannot understand... Why is this..."

Of course, Haruaki did not know the reason either. If Satsuko's words just now were true, very likely, she herself did not know either. Only because someone collected it and then someone else robbed it—finally, it simply ended up falling into the hands of Satsuko of the Draconians. If one had to guess, it was probably because it was a convenient weapon.

"Umuu... Right now, I have only one thing I can say to the teacher."

"...?"

After hearing Kaidou's story, Fear crossed her arms before her chest and drew her face close to Kaidou. Taking a deep breath—her lips twisted as though in a sneer—she said:

"Basically, *so what?*"

"..."

Kaidou swallowed her breath without speaking. Fear ignored her and continued to talk:

"The story just now was simply your past. I understand. But does that constitute a reason for you to lie here unable to move? We are currently being attacked and pursued. Those two are taking innocent people and our friends as hostages. In spite of that, you are still unable to move—Putting me and my kind aside, that implies that you don't care about these students—Kirika, Shiraho and this shameless Haruaki. Furthermore, those people who became hostages are irrelevant to you as well, right?"

Fear already knew the answer and was perfectly aware that she was being very despicable. But still, she asked.

"No... I am..."

Kaidou gripped the shovel hard.

"...Indeed, I... am the teacher who is supposed to save the students. Even an ordinary person cannot feel uninvolved when hostages' lives are at risk. But, even so... Even so, I really... am very useless..."

She sighed. A sigh that admitted everything and despaired.

"...You have made me realize that I had mistakenly believed I had become stronger. I was supposed to have trained myself for these situations—But still ended up powerless. It makes me feel that the way I am, I have no right to stand on the battlefield. Take for example, all those reasons on that night which I used to make a stand, even at the cost of deceiving myself of my weakness, all have now vanished. Indeed, trying to protect someone whom I had superimposed my sister's image onto, when she is definitely not my sister... Even though I already discovered it from the very start."

Kaidou murmured as she confessed her cowardice while slowly standing up.

Then she raised her hand and presented the horizontal shovel to Fear.

"T-Teacher..."

"...Take this if you need it. Cowardly as I am, keeping it in my possession won't do any good."

Haruaki watched in amazement as all this unfolded. Fear silently received the shovel. It felt so heavy.

At this moment, in her heart—There were still doubts.

Namely, doubts regarding why Kaidou was unable to fight as a result of cowardice.

After hearing Kaidou's words, Fear concluded that what she needed to do had not changed. Just like just now.

Hence, she repeated the same question.

Carelessly shifting her position, she circled over beside Kaidou—

"Hmm~ You're cowardly and useless, yeah... But *so what?*"

Smack.

Using the reverse side of the shovel, Fear spanked Kaidou's very exposed bottom beneath the revealing swimsuit.

"Hmm...?"

"F-Fear? W-What are you doing?"

"Hmph, for some reason... I feel very mad. Because the teacher keeps saying strange things, it makes feel all annoyed inside. So I'm punishing her. What's odd about that?"

"O-Of course it's very odd!"

Indeed, Fear was very agitated. If the weak really should stay away from the action instead of getting in the way—

Then what about Haruaki here?

Was he someone who should stay away from the scene instead?

Indeed, perhaps it would be dangerous for him because he was useless. Perhaps it would be better for him to be absent. However—Fear thought to herself, why did she feel the contrary?

She hoped he could stay.

Supposing what Kaidou just said was correct—it was as though she were cynically advocating that "hoping to stay here was wrong in itself." But that should not be true. Then why did Fear feel that it should not be true? Hence, she began to search for the answer to this question—

"Yeah... Right. The power to fight on your own, that doesn't really matter. I sincerely believe it's irrelevant."

"You say... It is irrelevant?"

The spanking hit should have hurt but Kaidou only looked at Fear without stroking her buttocks.

"In the past, there were a number of occasions when I thought I had become

stronger. But these feelings didn't come up when I finally defeated hated enemies. This is because I fight only after I resolve myself to defeat the enemy. Hence, being able to defeat the enemy is the way it should be from the start."

"..."

"Those are not the times when I feel myself becoming stronger—Instead, it was when Shiraho and Sovereignty came to help me, or back when I recalled everyone's faces and was able muster the strength to smash that cross, or that time when I was even able to endure the pain of my own torture tools as soon as I reminded myself I was doing it for Kirika and everyone. It was during times like those when I felt that I had become stronger."

Indeed, it was when she felt connected to others.

Only then did she feel that she had become stronger. In that case—

"In that case, what I call strength is different from what you—or those Draconians—consider strength. Also, the strength you need is definitely useless here."

Hence.

Fear threw the shovel back to Kaidou. But for some reason, she suddenly found Haruaki's gaze, which was focused on her, quite embarrassing to endure. Turning her gaze to the side, she said:

"...I knew very early on that you had no idea how to face me. I also understood why you would think that. I knew it couldn't be helped. However—I remember that I have never expressed my opinion or what I was thinking inside. If I don't say it out, there won't be a beginning."

Fear found herself feeling very thirsty. How truly incredible. Clearly she only intended to voice her honest thoughts, but why was she so nervous?

"My wish is to live like a human. Perhaps that's not permitted, but even though it's natural for people to hate me, I still wish for that. But then living 'like a human' is not a matter that is limited to my own existence. Humans must connect with others around them. They must possess that quality of what I call strength. In other words—I want to live like a human by becoming that kind of person. So, umm... For the sake of making me stronger, are you willing to help

me? Are you willing to become stronger together with me...?"

"What you mean is... You do not need... this...?"

"I believe that everything's screwed if I take that shovel away now. It feels like the chance for me and you to become strong together will never come again if I did that... So..."

With greatly troubled eyes, Kaidou bowed her head to look at the returned shovel. Fear impatiently tapped her fingers on her arm as she waited for Kaidou's response. Grinning cheerfully, Haruaki spoke up:

"Uh—Kaidou-sensei, many parts of this girl's words might be tough to understand... But let me try giving my interpretation. It boils down to two simple things. First of all, she wants to get along better with you and hopes that you could help."

"Get along better...?"

"What!? I-I didn't say that! I'll curse you!"

Although Fear was hammering away at Haruaki's back, he ignored her and continued:

"Secondly, she says that if she can improve relations with you, she'll become even stronger—But not just Fear herself, but also you, Kaidou-sensei. Of course, that includes the rest of us too."

"...Become even stronger... really?"

Kaidou seemed to sigh lightly.

Then after a few seconds, she finally turned her gaze away from the shovel.

There was no longer any hollow wavering in her eyes.

"Is there something... I am capable of doing...?"

"Yes... Of course. First, I have a request. I've come up with a plan but I need your help."

For some reason, Fear breathed a sigh of relief.

Immediately, a particular feeling took root in her heart.

She was convinced that if this was carried out smoothly, she would become stronger again.

While happily enjoying that feeling, Fear began to swiftly explain what they were going to do next.

Part 4

"Tada—!"

"Ah, Fear-san! You finally agree to be Satsuko's opponent? Satsuko is so happy!"

"H-Haruaki-kun...? And the teacher as well!"

Haruaki, Fear and Kaidou had rushed into the battleground in the Jungle Area. Konoha and Satsuko were clashing intensely while Kuroe and Kirika were having a long range battle against Fourteen. Konoha and Kuroe were not completely unscathed. In particular, Kirika's left arm was dangling and she frowned whenever she was dodging the enemy's attacks. She was bleeding profusely from a large gouging wound on her shoulder and the sight alone was painful already. As much as the new arrivals wanted to enter the fray and assist immediately, however—

"Damn it, excuse us, everyone! Please hang in there a little longer!"

Fear's group began to conduct a search while staying vigilant of the enemies' movements. Instead of going over to help Konoha and the others, Fear and Kaidou went over to the messy pool side in search of their target. Konoha, Kuroe and Kirika's puzzled gazes felt painful—In actual fact, things would become even simpler had they asked for Konoha's help. However, Konoha was the only one capable of engaging in close quarters combat with Satsuko who was closing in on them. Hence, they could not ask her to help.

Shortly after.

"Great, this will do! Found it! Let's make a hasty retreat!"

"What?"

"Heavens gracious, you're not going to fight Satsuko? Then Satsuko won't be able to train at all—!"

Fear and Kaidou returned to the quiet Slides Area. Fear then placed on the ground something that had been rolling on the pool side—a brick that Fourteen had shot. Although most of it had shattered, miraculously, part of it was intact. A piece probably large enough to grip in one hand—

"Teacher, please."

"No problem."

Kaidou pressed the shovel's front tip against the brick on the floor. Then the brick was chipped down by the metal scraping against it.

"Not enough. Do this side next."

"...This side?"

"That's right. Muu—Then scrape it a bit here. This part's too long, chip it down by about two millimeters."

"Affirmative."

A scraping sound was heard as the brick was chipped down by the sturdy shovel. Haruaki pondered various things as he watched them working together. Soon after, the brick became a size smaller.

Indeed, its six sides were now equal in area—A cube.

"Finished! Emulation... Start!"

Fear pressed her hand against the brick in elation. Instantly, it transformed into a giant, black, metallic cube. Then accompanied by the sound of gears, a giant drill was formed.

"Great, this is usable! Prepare for a counterattack!"

"W-Wait a sec! It's okay for you to fight now but do you have any countermeasures planned?"

"What are you talking about, Haruaki? Cow Tits... can die for all I care but I must hurry and help Kuroe and Kirika! Even without a plan, it should work out in the end!"

"That's what I mean. If it doesn't work out, I'll be very troubled..."

Haruaki did not think Satsuko and Fourteen were opponents who could be

defeated easily. Furthermore, it was of utmost importance that Fourteen could not be allowed to escape. This was because Sovereignty, Shiraho as well as the guests at the pool were probably all inside her. Hence, they absolutely must prevent Fourteen and Satsuko from running off with the captives.

(So... What should we do...?)

Haruaki pondered as his gaze wandered. Just as he was doing that, his attention was suddenly drawn to a certain spot on the wall in the pool area.

He slowly turned his head and examined the school swimsuit-clad body of Fear—who was desperately urging "Let's hurry" with great agitation—and recalled a fact.

"W-What are you staring at me for!? You shameless brat, I'll curse you!"

The plan was decided.

"Konoha! Come over here!"

"You must be tired of the Cow Tits creature's performance, right? It's my turn to take over now!"

Just as Haruaki called out to Konoha, Fear was already holding her drill up high, rushing towards Satsuko who was located in front of the flowing swimming pool. Satsuko happily rotated the electric drill in her hand and said:

"Wow—You're finally here! Sob sob sob, as painful as it is to fight a dear friend such as Fear-san, it can't be helped... Fighting someone like Satsuko might be very boring for you, but please, Satsuko will be in your care!"

"What do you mean, it can't be helped!? Clearly you planned all of this. You two—are exactly the same as all those people I've encountered to this date! You're all crazy!"

"So mean~ Satsuko wishes that you'd call her a stoic. The Draconians simply work hard to make themselves stronger, that's all..."

Satsuko shuddered her shoulders like a puppy—But thrusting forward was a cursed drill that could easily skewer a human body. Fear used her giant drill to deflect the tool.

Konoha relegated the task of handling Satsuko to Fear. She watched Fear as she returned to Haruaki's side.

"Haruaki-kun... She was able to find a usable tool?"

"Rather than find, it would be more accurate to say it was made. Also, she even asked the teacher's help for it."

Haruaki indicated towards Kaidou who was standing behind, glaring severely at Satsuko. But currently, she was not getting hung up and confused by the past. Instead, she seemed to be branding something in her heart and her eyes were displaying resolute willpower.

After confirming Kaidou's state, Konoha's expression relaxed slightly. Although she did not comment on the teacher's condition—

"Then what should we do now? Since Fear-san is already here, maybe I should go deal with Fourteen? Ueno-san and Kuroe-san seem to be lacking in firepower... Also with all that bloodshed, it's quite difficult to watch any further. At least I know that's the current state of affairs."

"You're right. But before that, could you transform into the Japanese sword first? Because I came up with an idea."

"You came up with an idea... Since you want me to turn into the Japanese sword, are you thinking of using the Sword-Kill Counter? But that house is not a weapon, which means you want to destroy Satsuko-san's weapons...?"

Konoha tilted her head in puzzlement. Haruaki shook his head and said:

"No, even if we break the electric drill using the Sword-Kill Counter, it's useless if Fourteen runs away. After all, rescuing Sovereignty and the rest is our top priority. Fourteen is still the first one we need to deal with."

"You make a fair point. But in that case, what's the point of me transforming into a sword?"

"Yeah, so I'm going to tell you the battle plan. You might find it a bit much, but please endure... I will try not to look as much as possible."

Hence, Haruaki swiftly explained the plan to her. Konoha sighed as she agreed to accommodate his idea.

With a "poof," she turned back into a Japanese sword. With a subtle feeling, Haruaki took off the bikini swimsuit that was hanging on the sword's scabbard and hilt.

"Oh no... I-I've been stripped. Completely by Haruaki-kun..."

"S-Stop making strange noises! Let's go!"

Haruaki proceeded to take Konoha away from Satsuko's side, instead walking towards Kirika and Kuroe who were further away, dealing with projectile weapons flying across the swimming pool.

"Class Rep, are you okay?"

"Yachi... I'm fine, my arm is almost ready to move. But it's better if Konoha-kun doesn't look at it."

"Sorry... I will try my best to turn my gaze away..."

"...Reinforcements are here? Wonderful!"

Kuroe glanced sideways and spoke. The tip of her hair was chasing the enemy like spears. Fourteen conjured a broom to sweep it away while changing her location. Seeing the state of things, Haruaki asked Kirika:

"What's the current situation?"

"Stalemate, probably? Whenever we attack, we can interfere with Fourteen's shooting to some extent... But to be frank, I think she's been holding back so far. Maybe she intends to have a real duel once Fear-kun returned... But that seems to be quite right!"

"...«Geist»! «Geist»!"

The rain of projectiles flying across the pool increased in density. Among them were bricks, glass, objects resembling the backs of chairs, and many dishes. Many of those objects were caught by Kuroe's hair, many were dodged and many were struck down by Konoha's blade autonomously.

"...Finally getting serious? Okay, let us put our all into it! Only by doing that can we raise ourselves to the max."

"Whether you raise yourselves or not doesn't matter to us... Class Rep, Kuroe,

listen carefully to my plan. If it succeeds, this battle can be ended instantly. That Fourteen is currently in perfect location."

"It's great that you have a plan... But did you say location?"

Haruaki dodged the incessant firing of riotous household items while quickly explaining the plan to them both.

Haruaki was right, location was very important. Like all the other zones, this Jungle Area was in the shape of an isosceles triangle. Entering from the Slides Area, there was a wall on the right hand side—in other words, near the part of the isosceles triangle corresponding to the building's outer wall. Along this wall, there was long and narrow swimming pool with Tarzan ropes. In the center of the Jungle Area was the meandering, flowing swimming pool with an operating circulatory system. The location of Satsuko and Fear's battle was near the midpoint of the long and narrow swimming pool. On the other hand, Haruaki's group was roughly in the center of the triangular zone, near the Slides Area, with Fourteen separated from them on the opposite side of the flowing swimming pool. Indeed, Fourteen's location was especially great.

The explanation finished quickly. Kirika and Kuroe nodded in comprehension—Then they extended their respective weapons towards Fourteen. Instead of performing a pincer attack, they both attacked from Fourteen's left side. While counterattacking by shooting back, Fourteen moved towards her other side, thinking "I'm not going to let you catch me." This prompted the start of the operation.

"Let's go!"

Haruaki threw the sword in his hand as hard as he could. Spinning rapidly in the air, the Japanese sword flew easily across the flowing swimming pool, finally turning back to human form and landing on the pool side. At this moment, Kuroe and Kirika turned around and spoke.

"Kono-san, are you recalling the fun you had during the cultural festival when you used that method of movement? I see, with this, you can legally treat Haru to a sight of your bursting bosom~"

"...A-Absolutely ridiculous! If that's really the case, I will have no choice as the class representative but to ban this sort of behavior henceforth!"

Making various remarks, the group ran towards Satsuko's side.

Having landed, Konoha ran along the edge of the pool, closing in on Fourteen and chopping with her hand to attack.

"Hmm..."

Fourteen retreated. In order to counterattack, she needed to summon a broom or a block of wood to her hand, which would probably buy Haruaki's side a couple seconds of time, right? The distance their footsteps covered in that period was also an opportunity.

Appearing in Haruaki's view was silver hair, moving horizontally with great speed, fluttering parallel to the floor.

"Hah... Excuse me but I have no intention of having a drill duel with you! Instead, you should drill holes in those wooden blocks over there on your side! That'll definitely be more fun than this kind of fight!"

"H-How could that be possible? Where are you going? What about the friendship fight with Satsuko...!?"

"That has nothing to do with me!"

At the same time when Haruaki was throwing Konoha, Fear was also charging forward with only one destination in mind. Locked onto that single target, Konoha and the others were pushing Fourteen towards it.

Jumping away from Konoha to obtain a suitable combat distance, Fourteen summoned a close range weapon. Her current location was in front of a window. This was also the top vertex of the isosceles triangle, or in other words, the center of this floor. This rectangular window, embedded in the wall, was facing the hollowed area that was part of the facilities on the floor below.

To Fear, who was informed beforehand and running towards that location, it was as though Fourteen had jumped into range on her own. Hence, without any hesitation, Fear transformed the drill in her hand to a new form.

"Mechanism No.23 hole type, thorned surface form: «Maranatha»—Curse Calling!"

Described in a single sentence, it was a bed of nails. A thick slab of steel, as

large as a table in area, with countless spikes and blades of varying lengths standing upright on its surface. Conceivably, Fear's former master had forced victims to stand upon it while he watched them with a glass of wine in his hand, admiring the way they finally collapsed in complete exhaustion—In other words, the sight of their dead bodies, pierced by blades all over. But currently, Fear was holding it on its side to use as a shield, turning it into a deadly bulldozer rushing towards Fourteen.

Fear had chosen this torture tool because the force of its impact was impossible to evade. Indeed, "impossible to evade" was the most important point, followed by the fact that "it could be pushed to apply pressure."

Destroying Fourteen in one strike was probably quite a challenge. But pushing on the other hand—

If all they needed to do was push her towards the window behind her that overlooked the diving pool, this torture tool's curse was more than capable for the job. Indeed, this was good enough. This conclusion was substantiated by past images: how Kirika, despite being on the verge of death, had used the «Tragic Black River» to pull Fourteen into the swimming pool, as well as the way Fourteen was walking underwater at the bottom of the pool.

Hence, this was going to work. It should work.

Fear's gaze was infused with her prayers as her eyes met with Fourteen's.

"...!?"

Haruaki gulped.

Sure enough, just as predicted, Fear's torture tool caught Fourteen's body. However, that was as far as it went.

Despite being caught between the window and the torture tool, the cursed house forced ominous ghostlights to glow—

At this moment, a mysterious and giant mass appeared out of thin air to resist the pressure Fear was applying.

To think that her opponent would ignore her and go over to Fourteen's side.

Was it really because she was very weak? Because fighting with her was no fun at all? Troubling, how extremely troubling. She had become friends with her only because she wished to fight. Ahhh, I really treated her as a friend, fighting everyone really has been painful—Even so, the fight must go on. Should the fight end here, then all meaning would be lost.

Carrying such thoughts, fueled purely by the desire to pursue strength, Ontenzaki Satsuko prepared to chase Fear. However—

"I won't let you—go over to interfere!"

Kirika blocked her path and extended the «Tragic Black River». Although Satsuko twisted her body many times to dodge, the belt remained relentless like a snake. Finally, her right hand was entangled. However, Satsuko yelled "out of my way" and instantly used her left hand's boxcutter to sever the belt, thereby regaining her freedom.

"Ah~ Sorry for being so weak, Satsuko can only perform this simple of an attack...!"

Satsuko apologized sincerely as she rushed forward to make a thrust with the drill in her right hand. However, Kirika's reply was quite unexpected.

"Isn't simple a great thing? Since it is this simple an attack, I can act as a shield no matter how many times I'm attacked... Like this, ahhhh!"

Kirika extended her palm towards the electric drill. Naturally, Satsuko did not stop stabbing. The long drill bit burrowed into Kirika's wrist, causing blood to spurt as it spun, but gripped by Kirika, Satsuko could not pull it back out. Pressing on the switch, Satsuko caused the drill bit to spin and lengthen, but this accomplished nothing except increasing the number of times Kirika suppressed her screams. Were it to extend any further, the drill's tip would probably emerge from her elbow.

"Ahhh~ Wonderful, who knew this was possible, truly amazing...! Satsuko is so impressed! If Satsuko could defeat this kind of Kirika-san, could cowardly Satsuko become slightly stronger? Perhaps it's a stretch, but, huh—Thank you...!"

Satsuko gave up on pulling the drill out and swung the boxcutter in her left

hand instead. If she were to chop off the arm where the drill was embedded, it should be possible to pull out, right? Just as she was thinking that—

"Ah—Ahhh—Actually, I've been looking for a chance to use this gimmick for a while. Enter stage."

Satsuko suddenly felt her left hand weighted down as well. A closer look showed that it was entangled by black hair. There were Tarzan ropes above the long and narrow swimming pool that was located along a wall in the Jungle Area. Using one of them, Kuroe had moved over to Satsuko's back all at once.

While holding onto the rope firmly, Kuroe gazed mistily as she wrapped her hair around Satsuko's left arm, immobilizing it. As for her right hand, the drill was still stuck in Kirika's hand. Without notice, the belt came to entangle Satsuko again.

"Ah~ Facing a crisis here. But once this challenge is overcome, Satsuko should be able to emerge stronger—"

Just as she was about to kick Kirika using her unrestrained leg, Kirika made an intriguing and twisted expression.

"—That depends on whether you can overcome it."

"Eh?"

Another person's voice came from behind. A second later, Satsuko felt two cases of intense pain running throughout her body. One came from her left hand and the other from her right. Both hands had been struck by a certain solid object—Completely mercilessly, hard enough to shatter bone.

"Gah, ha... Uwah!?"

Ouch, ouch, ouch. The weapons in both hands fell to the floor. Satsuko looked back to find in her tearful field of view—

"Indeed... You are not my younger sister. Absolutely not. Because Satsu was ashamed of having swung this kind of object, going as far as to end her own life. She never felt at all that wielding this object made her stronger!"

Staring at the boxcutter fallen on the floor, Kaidou swung the shovel in her hand down hard.

Instantly, the sound of the blade snapping could be heard along with the noise of plastic parts scattering.

Next, Satsuko felt something tighten around her neck, unsure if it was the belt or the hair—

(Ah, just as thought, Satsuko is still very weak...)

Muttering in her heart, she then lost consciousness.

"Ku... Gah!"

"«Polter»—«Geist»!"

Gathering her entire bodyweight, Fear used her shoulder to push the bed of nails forward, but just now, she saw Fourteen conjure patterns of ghostlights in the narrow space between the torture tool and the window. Since the torture tool was already a shield, Fear had nothing to fear from the ghostlights' stun gun effect—Given the situation, her enemy was aiming to shoot at point-blank range.

Suddenly, Fourteen pushed back with greater force. This mass did not come from a wooden block or a brick but something much more massive that was about to appear in this space. Most likely, another of those pillars.

"Another one left...!?"

But she could not afford to falter now. Fear mustered the strength from her entire body and pushed.

"H-Hey... Is this... your full power? Is this... your full power?"

"If it is, so what...!? I have no idea what you're trying to do, but immediately —"

Fourteen was right. The bed of nails was pushed back a few centimeters further. But Fear laughed and—

"What... In that case, all I can say is this. Compared to my power, you amount to nothing whatsoever!"

In that instant—Two thuds came from her two sides.

Two weights were added on her left and right, pushing at the torture tool together. Originally losing the contest, the torture tool was slowly gaining an advantage again.

As for the two people beside her, those two who were giving her power—
They were Haruaki and Konoha.

"I'll only thank you for this time, Cow Tits... This job suits you perfectly, because the mass of your offensive lumps of meat is really—"

"I'm going to send you flying if you continue saying that!"

"Guh, so... So very very very heavy...!"

Next, Fear heard other footsteps. Kuroe? Kirika? Kaidou? Feeling completely confident about those footsteps, Fear continued to push the torture tool forward, pushing with reckless abandon. To the end, to the end, pushing to the very end—

"Hmm...?"

Just as Fourteen groaned, all the weight vanished at the same time.

Next came an intense sound of glass breaking. Nevertheless, Fear continued to push the torture tool forward, refusing to let Fourteen escape from here. Indeed, she must be pushed over the edge.

The vanishing weight included Fear's own bodyweight. Suddenly there was a floating feeling. Fear instantly understood that she had rushed over the edge together with Fourteen as a consequence of pushing too hard. Nevertheless, she no longer cared by this point.



"Haha, cursed house! You're definitely heavier than me! That's because you're a house! Even I can't swim—so it's impossible for you to swim either!"

"W-What—?"

Fourteen seemed to have realized where she was falling towards.

It was the extremely deep pool for diving that was roughly dozens of meters deep.

Even with superhuman physical abilities, she can't possibly float back up on her own, right? Even when we're unable to breathe, we simply become inactive and do not die from suffocation, so she'll simply linger underwater for the time being—That's all.

There was nothing left for her to do. Fear could do nothing except fall down together with Fourteen. However, this was trivial. Even if she fell into the water, Kuroe or Kirika would probably find a way to save her.

Just as Fear was thinking over these things—

Suddenly, her entire body felt an impact. Not only the floating feeling stop, but Fear also felt her bodyweight once more.

In order to confirm the reason, Fear looked up.

"...!"

It was Kaidou.

She was desperately reaching forward. Despite getting cut by the window's broken glass—

Still, she gripped Fear's wrist firmly.

She was using the hand that had previously swatted Fear's hand away in a vicious and painful manner.

"There is one thing that I must apologize to you about. At last, I gradually begin to understand my own feelings."

"...?"

"I... must have been scared of you. Hence, I used 'no idea how to face you' as an excuse to cover it up."

Her sincere eyes were looking this way. Hence, Fear gazed straight back into her eyes.

"I only recognized you as 'something that harms people'—that is what I have always believed. Hence I felt afraid, worrying if I would get hurt again, worrying if I would have to endure that kind of pain again. And that was all because I was too cowardly. Although I hoped to become strong, I actually had yet to become strong."

"But it's really true that I am something that harms people..."

"However, that is not all. That is not the only label that classifies you as a being. What I have understood is this, Fear Cubrick, Girl, Seat No.14 of Year 1 Class 2."

Fear seemed to feel as though something was being transmitted by the hand that she touched properly for the first time.

Warmth.

What she failed to reach that night—simple and gentle, human warmth.

"...How unbelievable. I currently... feel as though I've gained another source of power again."

"Really? Perhaps that might be understandable."

"Yes, exactly because I've repeatedly become stronger over time, that's why I dare to say this. Although I am indeed something that harms people, Kaidou-sensei, you're right. That's not all. I am also the ordinary Fear, a student named Fear Cubrick, living in the shameless brat's home... Also, I was once something that harms people. Now, I don't want to hurt anyone and I've already obtained the necessary strength that allows me to assert that boldly."

"I think so too. I caught your hand only because I understood that fact."

Fear's petite face was smiling towards Kaidou as she shifted her gaze. Behind Kaidou's body that kept sliding down, entering Fear's view were them—the faces of those who were desperately pulling her back.

They were the reason why she had become strong.

Part 5

"Sovereignty-san and Shiraho-san... It looks like they only fainted."

"...Looks like it..."

In the Jungle Area which had become the main battlefield, a few dozen people were lying on the floor. They all had their eyes closed but there were no external injuries.

Satsuko and Fourteen's bodies were tied up using Kuroe's hardened hair. Apart from having her weapons confiscated, Satsuko was also placed quite some distance away, lying unconscious. Seeing as Satsuko was being held as a hostage, Fourteen probably would not dare to make any false moves.

At last, the primary objective of rescuing the hostages was completed. Haruaki muttered "how troubling" and sighed.

Just as his plan assumed, Fourteen really was unable to leave the swimming pool by her own strength. Although she struggled for quite a while, she finally ended up unconscious and sprawled at the bottom of the pool. Having waited for that opportunity, Kuroe and Kirika proceeded to pull her up to the water surface and tied her up in the middle of the pool. Were she to resist, they would release the belt and the hair, dropping her into the water again.

Then negotiations were carried out. Treating the still unconscious Satsuko as a hostage, they demanded that Fourteen release all of her hostages instead. Luckily, since the diving pool on the floor below was not open to the public, there was not a single person there. Had there been people there, the negotiations probably would not have been able to proceed in such relaxed conditions. This really was quite fortunate. In any case, after being told that she would be pulled out of the pool once she agreed to release the hostages, Fourteen considered for a short while before accepting, thus resulting in the current situation.

"I'm not gullible enough to take everything the enemy said as truth. But no matter what, I'm relieved that the hostages are unharmed. Those two—as well as everyone else—should wake up after a short while."

After confirming Shiraho and the other's condition, Konoha finally breathed a sigh of relief. Naturally, she had already put her swimsuit back on. Haruaki recalled how the instant everything was settled, Konoha had gone "P-Please don't look—!" and jumped into the swimming pool, diving straight to the bottom in one breath to retrieve her swimsuit. How should one put it? In that instant, Konoha was definitely the ultimate aquatic organism, simultaneously embodying a tuna's speed and a shark's ferocity in hunting prey.

"Really, everyone is safe and sound? Thank goodness..."

Kneeling beside Konoha, Fear had been watching everything worriedly and could finally relax. But in the next second, her eyes turned sharp unmistakably. Because Satsuko woke up.

Satsuko surveyed her surroundings in a daze. The pain from her broken hands caused her to frown and scream in pain. Then—

"Ah~ Sure enough, Satsuko lost~..."

"Absolutely. We're not going to entertain your whatever training any further."

"Okay... Because Satsuko already lost once, Satsuko and Fourt will rest for now."

"...What do you mean by that?"

"Uh—In principle, all members of the Draconians are engaged in jobs similar to mercenaries... But sometimes, the higher-ups will give orders telling us 'there's a suitable opponent that will help you improve your power level—' Then we will go defeat the opponent as part of our training. After all, fighting enemies that are too strong or too weak does not help with improving one's strength."

"Then this time, you came to fight us on your superiors' orders?"

"Yes."

Haruaki looked at one another's faces, but there was only one question they

wanted to ask.

"Will anyone else come? Tell me."

"No idea, because the higher-ups decide that, it's not something that someone lowly like Satsuko would know~"

This uncertainty regarding the arrival of future opponents was not particularly good from the standpoint of psychological health. However, Haruaki did not think that Satsuko was still lying by this point.

"Chosen as targets for training without consent, how absolutely ridiculous... Unacceptable."

"Hmm~ Let's hope it doesn't happen again~"

"Anyway, isn't it fine as long as we beat them up if they come? But more importantly, what are we going to do with these two here? We can't help it if new enemies visit. But we can't just leave these two here like this..."

Fear murmured with a displeased look. At this moment, Satsuko opened her mouth wide and said: "Oh, Satsuko almost forgot."

"There's something you need to know about the Draconians! How should this be phrased? Basically, the agreement when a battle is lost. Anyway, there are two essential details of that sort."

"Essential details?"

Haruaki repeated the words. Satsuko smiled and nodded "yes." For some reason, Fourteen's shoulder twitched at this time.

"Uh—The first one, Satsuko may have mentioned it before... The loser must reward the winner with one piece of equipment in their possession. But you've already taken them all, right? Sob sob... Cowardly Satsuko had spent so much effort gathering those... But that can't be helped. After all, most of them were just sharp bladed instruments. Oh no, but there's the destroyed boxcutter."

Satsuko looked up and glanced at Kaidou.

Sent flying by Fourteen, Kaidou had suffered quite a few injuries on her arms and legs along with cracked ribs apparently, but she remained standing nonchalantly despite the pain. Although Haruaki had asked her many times,

"Kaidou-sensei, please sit down and have a break" but she did not listen at all, even going so far as to say "I shall rest once all problems are resolved." But naturally, Haruaki's group could not stand by and do nothing. Hence, Kuroe used her hair to perform first aid treatment on her obvious wounds. Haruaki made the suggestion while worrying if she might dislike that type of treatment but his fears naturally turned out to be unfounded. Because the moment she reached out to catch Fear from falling, something was definitely starting to change gradually.

Although Kaidou was standing straight without saying a word, under the pressure of her forceful gaze, Satsuko immediately shrank her shoulders and turned her face away.

"...Also, that electric drill there is quite something—So please, you must cherish it. Especially since it has passed through many hands, so basically, well, it's rumored to have undergone measures to lighten its curse."

"What...?"

That probably meant an Indulgence Disk, right? If the Draconians customarily robbed their combat opponents, it was quite possible. Haruaki recalled the Indulgence Disks' alleged tendency to attract one another, but just as Haruaki's group was looking for the drill that was piled up with the other weapons—

They were suddenly taken by surprise. Too careless.

With her hands bound behind her back, Satsuko rolled on the floor directly. Fourteen also rolled herself at the same time. The instant their bodies made contact—

"Sorry~ Here's the second essential detail. Fourt, please...!"

Leaving behind these words, Satsuko disappeared into the cursed house. At the same time, Fourteen conjured shards of glass above her body that fell upon herself like rain. Instantly, she was released from the hair that Kuroe had used to bind her in various places. Naturally, Kuroe had tied her up mercilessly. Hence, when Fourteen forcibly severed her bonds, even her cape, clothing and the veil on her face were cut up together as well.

As Haruaki's group readied themselves for battle, Fourteen took a great leap

back without hesitation.

"...Oh no."

Suddenly, she realized she was almost completely nude. Her cape was gone and the sarashi wrapping her chest had opened up completely. Originally hanging on, her shorts also slid down as a result of her jump just now. The veil on her face also fell off. Only her heavy boots remained, resulting in a very awkward appearance.

"Eeeek... S-So embarrassing! The curtain!"

But from her perspective, covering her face seemed to take precedence over her body's exposure. Frantically, she picked up a scrap of the cape that was caught on her boot. While covering up her face, she said:

"Phew... The second essential detail is that 'Although the Draconians aim to become the strongest, no one can be free from setbacks; in fact, setbacks make people stronger.' In other words—stated simply, fleeing is a type of strength. Hence, I shall excuse myself."

"Y-You're already looking like a total pervert. Why are you trying to act cool with your words?"

"Don't think you can escape! At least, promise us you won't come again...!"

Fourteen ignored them completely and ran singlemindedly. Her destination was the window she had fallen through earlier. Perhaps noticing Fear and the others chasing after her, she jumped through the window without hesitation. However, she did not fall straight down this time. Jumping up towards the roof of the pool area, she launched a laundry pole vertically into the ceiling just as she was about to collide. Instantly, she grabbed onto the pole that was embedded into the concrete. Before that metal pole could fall off the ceiling, she conjured another pole in front of her at arm's length and stabbed it into the ceiling. Grabbing the new pole with one hand, she moved herself to the next pole as though she were climbing monkey bars. Using the poles she conjured on the spot, Fourteen repeated the same motion a number of times, moving herself forcibly across the ceiling. Shattering sounds from the ceiling were heard no less than ten-odd times. Then they continued many more times. Finally, Fourteen stopped her gravity-defying trip across the ceiling, letting go of a pole

and falling freely. However, she was no longer above the diving pool and landed firmly on the concrete floor of the pool side... She must have calculated that an ordinary jump would land her in the water from lack of distance. Hence, she used poles in this method of movement to secure herself some horizontal distance.

"Tsk..."

Kirika tried to extend the «Tragic Black River» but at this distance, it was futile even if the belt could touch Fourteen. The same applied to Kuroe's hair.

"I have no wish to fight you all any further today. I have no idea if we will meet again, but goodbye..."

Fourteen looked up at Haruaki's group as she spoke. Then destroying a glass door that was probably locked, she casually disappeared from the diving pool area.

Fear gnashed her teeth in rage. As much as they wanted to give chase, they could not just leave Shiraho and Sovereignty behind unattended. Besides, Satsuko's hands were fractured already. At the very least, those two should not be reappearing any time soon.

"...Can't be helped. Anyway, we'll just have to let things end here."

"Yeah... After all, we currently don't have the energy to chase them either."

"By the way, what are we gonna do next? Aren't all the exits blocked?"

"Since the enemies in our way are gone, we should be able to clear the debris away by combining all our strength... But I want to avoid unnecessary attention. The same goes for exiting through the central hollow. Even if we don't do anything, I'm sure it's almost about time that people notice the unusual situation here."

Only after hearing Kirika's analysis did Haruaki finally realize the severity of the current situation. The facilities were in a tragic state with a whole pile of unconscious people. What should they do...?

"I concur with Ueno's opinion."

At this moment, Kaidou surveyed the surroundings and spoke.

"After all, the closing time will arrive. When that happens, someone will discover the situation, right? All we need to do is wait quietly for rescue. As a matter of principle, I shall report the entire story to the superintendent afterwards... If there is a need to handle the troublesome aftermath, surely that man will find a way to deal with it? After all, he possesses both money and connections."

Somehow it felt like she was suggesting that they leave all the trouble to the superintendent to handle. However—she made a good point, perhaps that really was the only choice. After all, the superintendent was friends with the hotel's operator. Even if he were to say he had connections with the police, it would come as no surprise.

"But what about the water park's tragic state and the pile of collapsed guests? I'm guessing that Fourteen did not pay attention to security cameras when entering. Also, once the guests wake up, someone might end up saying they saw a weirdo in a cape... Or maybe it'll be treated as a terrorist incident?"

"Maybe. But even if we worry about all that, it is useless. But there is one thing that we must do next."

"W-What is it?"

"When help arrives, if we are the only ones conscious, we will attract unnecessary suspicions. Hence, in order to avoid unnecessary trouble, we have no choice but to do this. Indeed—"

Kaidou looked at Haruaki's group with extraordinary sharpness and continued:

"—Basically, 'play dead.'"

Haruaki somehow felt that there was no need to propose that with such absolute seriousness. Teacher, it's not like anyone is dead.

Everyone objected in their minds but Kaidou had a point. Hence, they all decided to play dead while waiting to be rescued.

Haruaki laid himself down beside Shiraho and Sovereignty so that he could explain the situation to them immediately if they happened to wake up. Upon further thought, he felt that having all the guests collapsed in the Jungle Area

would be too unnatural, but it could not be helped by this point. Hopefully, the rescuers would conclude that the terrorists moved everyone here for some kind of dogmatic reason. Wait a sec, come to think of it, there was a lifeguard in the Slides Area. Although he was not here, that did not matter anymore. While waiting for help to arrive with nothing to do, Haruaki intended to occupy his mind with insignificant thoughts to kill time. This resulted—

"Yes... Play dead, I must play dead."

Just as he opened his eyes, Haruaki found Konoha's cleavage right before him. Why?

"Uh—Umm, on further thought, I think that since we're trying to make it look like everyone fell unconscious together, it'd be more natural to lie down in one place. So..."

"That's right, I agree with playing dead so I'm coming to play dead. So, I was thinking of coming for a look... Muu, I've been caught by some kind of creature. Apart from displeasure, it's hard to breathe too."

Quick as a flash, Fear's silver hair flew as she slid herself between Haruaki and that cleavage.

"So cramped. Also, why do you have to speak in that strange tone of voice? That said, I don't really care."

"If you find it difficult to breathe, then leave! Making me lose a chance to charm him... No wait, I simply find you very much in the way!"

Next, Haruaki felt Kirika's back pressing firmly against his own back.

"Umm, I will take responsibility for explaining things to Shiraho-kun and Sovereignty-kun. In that case, this is the only position that works... Very well, it can't be helped."

"No, Class Rep, you can just leave that task to me..."

"For a child-like maiden like me, I think it'll be an extra touching scene if I'm found in my guardian's bosom during the rescue!"

"Hey, Kuroe, don't lie on top of me using that kind of weird excuse!"

Just as this mess was happening, Kaidou suddenly sat up from the arbitrary

location she had picked to lie down. Furthermore, she was looking at Haruaki with extreme skepticism.

"...Yachi Haruaki, although I do not quite understand what is going on... But since all the girls are doing it, perhaps it might be better if I go over and lied down near you like them as well? If that should be the case, I shall handle things appropriately."

Haruaki's group instantly froze for a moment, then shook their head desperately. On various levels of meaning, "too dangerous" was their consensus. Naturally, Kaidou cocked her head in puzzlement, then lay back down at her original spot.

At this moment, Haruaki's group suddenly realized something that they had overlooked.

Once the rescuers arrived at the scene, whom they were going to suspect first.

The number one candidate was, of course, the person dressed in an exhibitionist's swimsuit, all covered in injuries already and even bringing a shovel into the water park for some reason—a certain oblivious female teacher. Definitely her without a doubt.

Epilogue

The next day, in the classroom at school...

"Phew—It's finally over... Jeez, it's making me feel like some kind of rare animal."

"Nyahahaha, that can't be helped. After all, the victims caught up in the incident are in our class. But honestly, it's quite a disaster—Luckily, it ended peacefully."

By the time the lunch break arrived, Fear was finally liberated from the barrage of questioning she had been receiving. Currently, Kana was simply giggling while she rested her chin on her desk.

This was a familiar scene. After the intensity of the previous day ended, things had not changed as much as imagined. Fourteen and Satsuko had disappeared completely. As expected, there was an Indulgence Disk in the drill, which ended up sealing Fear's «The Teeth». After that, rumors of the water park incident naturally developed into the hot topic of conversation everywhere within a day...

Regarding that incident, the eyewitness accounts of the fainted guests remained unchanged as expected. In the end, it developed into an account of how some psycho brought various dangerous items and invaded the water park, *etc.* In a certain sense, it was not incorrect. Logically speaking, it would come as no surprise if national media and networks competed to report such a major incident, but currently, it was only treated as a city-level incident... Most likely, the superintendent had secretly taken some kind of measures. Even going so far as to take care of the media, this stood as proof of the superintendent's extraordinary connections.

Of course, Haruaki also suffered the same kind of questioning from his peers. However, that state somehow ended much quicker than for Fear. As a side

note, only half of the questions were about the incident. The other half were—"I-I heard that Sakuramairi-san was with you guys? C-C-Could you describe her swimsuit in detail!?"

"Kuroe-san was wearing a white school swimsuit? Th-That's truly amazing~! Wow! Any photos?"

"Even estimates are okay. Please help me with three-sizes ranking survey."

"A single male surrounded by girls... Go to hell!"

"What are you talking about!? If he were to die, the soul exchange event won't be able to trigger! So, Haruaki, fall down the stairs immediately and bump your head!"

Basically, these were the kinds of conversations that were going on. Then thinking the same thoughts but carrying a much higher level of interest and despair, a certain person was currently in front of Haruaki's desk.

"God! Hakuto Taizou made the biggest mistake of his life! A serious mistake! I don't care even if I would have been caught up in that incident. It might even have given me a chance to show my heroic side! I shouldn't have participated in a baseball match at all! I should've grasped something more important than a white ball. That's right, namely... Dreams!"

"Come on, I've heard you repeat that again and again. Next time we go swimming, I'll invite you."

"Yesterday's Konoha-san can only be seen yesterday! You really don't understand, you really fail to understand, Haruaki! SO please tell me one more time, yesterday's Konoha-san... H-How was she...?"

Haruaki sighed. He repeated what he had said, probably for the third time today.

"...A bikini."

"Ah—! Color?"

"White."

"Dear God!"

Just as Haruaki sighed and thought "He really never tires of this," Fear glared at him unhappily from her seat beside him.

"Taizou, you really like that creature on Cow Tits' body that much? Hmph, I really don't get it. All I can say is—That thing cannot defeat an uppercut! Hoho, that's all..."

"Ah, an uppercut? Fear-chan, what does that mean..."

"Hmm? That's applied towards her weak spot, swung with a 'bam' like that."

"Heeee!? Y-You're a god! A god reborn as a human is right here—! P-Please allow me to admire your great powers..."

Since Fear and Taizou were beginning to veer into retard territory, Haruaki had no choice but to change the subject abruptly.

"I feel so thirsty. Let's decide by rock-paper-scissors, the loser has to buy the winners drinks."

"Hmm? Great, I'm currently thirsty too from using my throat too much."

"I-I'll join in too—Going over to buy drinks now, there happens to be very little time left until the next period starts. This kind of high-risk game makes my blood boil with anticipation—"

"Hmm, very well. You shameless brat, don't cry to me when the time comes...!"

"Class Rep, do you want to join in?"

Just as Haruaki asked Kirika who was in the seat behind, she answered "okay" and joined in. Based on Kirika's personality, she seldom went swimming and it would be troublesome if other people kept asking her all sorts of things. Hence, in accordance with her request, the fact that she had gone swimming with everyone was omitted. Seeing her as the only one who could still enjoy peace and quiet, Haruaki felt a bit jealous.

Then just as everyone was preparing the motions for rock-paper-scissors...

The loser was instantly decided when a certain idiot uttered the following words, too full of herself for being praised as a god: "Fufufu... Let me now display the legendary uppercut!"

Going "muuuu" and pouting, Fear left the classroom, dragging her heavy steps. No sooner had she taken a few steps along the corridor when she saw her enemy's face.

"I-It's all your fault—!"

"Kyah! W-What on earth are you rambling inexplicably about?"

She stared straight at the chest of the startled Konoha. Tsk, I can't use the uppercut at this time— "Hmph... You're lucky you narrowly missed death..."

"You're completely incoherent. Anyway, about yesterday, you didn't say anything careless, did you?"

Konoha lowered her voice and asked. She's trusting me so little. Looking down on me.

"Of course, I only talked about unimportant things. Like attacking your weak point."

"Is that so? Good... Uh, what's with that word? I knew there was a problem, hold it right there!"

So noisy, I need to hurry and buy the drinks, there's no time left already. Leaving behind that eyesore called Cow Tits, Fear took off, her steps feeling even heavier against the corridor floor. Just as she was about to go downstairs to the vending machine at the entrance, she met another familiar face.

"Oh~ Shiraho. You look well, thank goodness."

"...Hmph."

As usual, Shiraho would brush past her with just a snort. But just as she was about to pass by Fear— "This returns the favor during the cultural festival, so I'm not going to say thanks."

"Hmm... I didn't save you because I wanted your thanks. You're my comrade so saving you is only natural, right? In fact, I'd feel very surprised if you thanked me."

Fear said that as she walked past. Just as Shiraho walked up a few steps, the

sound of her footsteps suddenly stopped. Fear looked back quizzically only to see her back. But coming from that direction was— "...Oh dear, is that so? But I am not comrades with you and the others. Instead, when you feel alarmed, troubled or in pain, I will even rejoice and think 'Serves you right!' For example, I threatened you this time just for the sake of sadistic enjoyment. Also, let me clarify beforehand so that you people don't get the wrong idea. This isn't for saving me but because you saved Sovereignty. So long as anyone saves that child's life, be it a devil, a gorilla or a winged insect, I will say the same thing. So—So, well... Th-Thank you..."

Her words were as quick as machine gun fire, but the final part was very soft in volume.

In the end, Shiraho did not look back at Fear and went upstairs directly. It was as though she did not want anyone to see her expression for some reason.

Fear felt a strange but heartwarming sensation.

Then she found her footsteps lightened as she continued on her way. When she reached the vending machine, she recalled the types of drinks her friends had decided and inserted the coins she was entrusted with. The operation of this machine was already very familiar to her. Just as she cradled in her arms the five drinks including her own, her gaze suddenly rested on the clock on the wall next to the vending machine. Crap! Perhaps due to speaking with Konoha and Shiraho, she was going to be late for the next period unless she hurried. Although there was probably no time left to enjoy the drinks now, they could save them for after school when they could chat and drink together. She knew it would be a very happy time. That said, she would be even happier were there rice crackers to go along.

Fear held the drinks as she rushed forward and started to sprint along the corridor.

Just as she was about to charge up the stairs, when she made contact with the first step— She suddenly sensed someone behind her.

"—Do not run in the corridors."

Smack.

A light tap on her bottom.

However, it was not a hand but something much harder.

"Ah..."

Looking back, she saw the back of someone leaving through the corridor. She was dressed in a tracksuit, her long hair secured with a flower hairpin, carrying a shovel lightly on her shoulder— "..."

Seeing that figure, Fear smiled. And a smile from the heart at that.

I made her mad for the first time.

That's right, it's quite strange indeed.

Logically speaking, I'm supposed to be doing things beneficial to humans instead.

Logically speaking, I shouldn't be getting others mad.

So why—Why did making someone mad fill my heart with such infinite joy?

Afterword

Isn't the Roman numeral VI quite easy to misread as IV? I am Minase, the one seeking agreement from everyone for this meaningless question. Hello again... Or rather, since this is my first book for this year, it feels like I should be saying "Happy New Year" to those who are buying this book on the first day it's being sold.

In any case, Volume IV—no wait, C³ VI with its heart pounding☆swimsuit action—is successfully presented to you all! Please don't mind the strange slogan. I was thinking of following that up with a set phrase like "Also comes with wardrobe malfunctions!" But uh—I think that's not exactly accurate... More accurately, it should feel more like "exposed" or "everyone look~" or "pop out~"...? Crap, I'm getting more and more confused here as I write. For those of you who are about to read the story, please confirm with your own eyes.

Then speaking of this volume, due to the messy chaos of last volume's cultural festival, I started writing while thinking "Let's write an especially simple plot this time." But are the contents actually simple... Hmmmmm, what do you all think? I think the result is the same as usual, with fun parts and serious parts. Anyway, Volume 5 had three new characters but this volume is very simple with only two. Speaking of female students in winter, it boils down to this after all! Navy-blue tights plus sailor suit boobs, as well as sarashi boobs unguarded in many ways. I worked very hard for the two of them... But despite how few the new characters are, the number of boobs announced here remain unchanged, isn't that incredible? Is this what's known as the magic of numbers?

Since there's not many lines left in the afterword, let me express my thanks next.

First is the illustrator, Sasorigatame-sama. With the new characters added along with the swimsuit looks of the regular cast, I must have added a lot to

your workload... Thank you for your hard work! Then there are the readers. When I first started writing C³, even myself was doubting whether there would be a sequel. But thanks to everyone's support, the story has been able to continue to this day... I sincerely thank everyone. There is still a lot of awesome content coming up in the future. It would be my greatest happiness if everyone can stay for the ride long-term!

Coming up next is Volume 7. A first in the series... Or rather, I should say it's my very first short story collection. You'll get to read the ones serialized in the Dengeki Bunko Magazine as well as new shorts featuring "that person" showing an unexpected side and other content. It shouldn't be a very long wait and should appear before everyone soon. Please offer your comments when the time comes.

Minase Hazuki

Translator's Notes and References

1. [↑ Pilder On!](#): a reference to the super robot series *Mazinger Z*.[\[1\]](#)